



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 21 Meitheamh 2018

Thursday, 21 June 2018

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 11.40 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Joint Sitting of the Houses of the Oireachtas

Pursuant to Resolutions passed by Dáil Éireann and by Seanad Éireann both Houses met in the Dáil Chamber at 11.45 a.m., the Ceann Comhairle presiding.

Address by Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission

An Ceann Comhairle: A Uachtaráin Juncker, mir wenschen Iech haerzlech willkommen zu Dublin. Is mór an pléisiúr dom fáilte a chur romhat anseo inniu, thar ceann an Chathaoirligh agus thar mo cheann féin, agus thar ceann Chomhaltaí uile Dháil Éireann agus Sheanad Éireann. Tá áthas orainn gur ghlac tú lenár gcuireadh páirt a ghlacadh sa mhalartú tuairimí seo, an tráth dúshlánach seo i saol an Aontais Eorpaigh. Ba mhaith liom freisin fáilte chroíúil a chur roimh Coimisinéir Phil Ó hÓgáin, an Uasal Michel Barnier, príomh-chaibidleoir an Choimisiúin maidir le Brexit, agus roimh chomhaltaí eile do thoscaireachta, in Áiléar na gCuariteoirí Oirirce.

Monsieur le Président Juncker, je suis très heureux de vous accueillir aujourd'hui au nom du Cathaoirleach et de moi-même, ainsi qu'au nom de tous les Membres de Dáil Éireann et de Seanad Éireann. Nous sommes ravis que vous ayez accepté notre invitation à participer à cet échange de vues, en cette période difficile que vit l'Union Européenne. I extend also a warm welcome to Commissioner Phil Hogan, Mr. Michel Barnier, the European Commission's chief negotiator for Brexit, and, indeed, the other members of your delegation in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery.

President Juncker, you have shown a keen interest in Ireland's role and future in Europe. As I welcome you to our Parliament, I am conscious that you are no stranger to our country or to this fair city. If I am not mistaken, it was here in Dublin at the European People's Party congress in 2014 that you were chosen as the candidate of that party for the Presidency of the European Commission, the role you now hold. As such, I am sure you have fond memories of

your time here. As you said in your most recent State of the Union address, “Now is the time to build a more united, a stronger, a more democratic Europe for 2025.” Today, as our Parliament contributes to the debate on matters of concern to the European Union, we fulfil one of the principal objectives of Article 12 of the treaty and contribute to a more democratic Europe.

There are many critical issues facing the Union today, including the need to maintain competitiveness and economic growth and the need to address the challenges of unemployment, migration and climate and technological change. We are also seeing increased geopolitical instability and threats to security from terrorist attacks. There is also, of course, the ever present challenge of keeping the Union close to its people. The democratic principles which informed the creation of the EU will be key to addressing these issues, as will solidarity among member states. As we chart a direction for the future as a Union of 27, we should have regard to those democratic principles wherever possible. In this context, we are mindful of the fact that, in less than one year’s time, Europe’s voters will exercise their mandate in elections to the European Parliament.

From an Irish point of view, the decision by the United Kingdom to withdraw from the European Union has profound implications given its impact on Northern Ireland and the peace process, as well as on trade and the common travel area between our two islands. I know, President Juncker, that you share these concerns and have expressed a desire that the Good Friday Agreement be preserved in all its dimensions and that life for citizens on both sides of the Border should continue as it is today. We welcome these sentiments. As we enter the decisive stage of the Brexit negotiations, I am reminded of the fact that, as Prime Minister of Luxembourg, you visited Dublin in 1996 and mediated successfully a dispute over your own EU economic and monetary union policy between French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Indeed, the press dubbed you at the time the “Hero of Dublin” for achieving an unlikely consensus between the two. Those mediation skills and an ability to reach consensus will be much needed in the days, weeks and months ahead as we seek a solution which will benefit all.

Since the negotiations are now entering a particularly crucial phase, today’s proceedings are timely and we appreciate the opportunity to hear your views at this important juncture. President Juncker, I now invite you join us in the Chamber to make your statement to this historic joint sitting of both Houses of the Oireachtas.

Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, then delivered his address.

Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker: Mr. Speaker, Taoiseach, other Members, I have some difficulties in walking. I am not drunk; I have sciatica. I would prefer to be drunk. It is a real honour to be with you here today for this special joint sitting of the Houses. It is a particular honour for me that you have joined in order to listen, hopefully carefully, to what I intend to say.

Over the years, I have spent some emotional and memorable moments here in Ireland. I think of the crucial Dublin summit in December 1996 where we paved the way for the single currency with the Stability and Growth Pact. Since then, my second name is “Hero of Dublin” - I am doing something for the reputation of the city. I think of the “Day of Welcomes” in May 2004, when we gathered in the Phoenix Park to welcome ten new countries into our Union celebrating the moment where European history and European geography came together. On a more personal note, I think back to 2014 when, in Dublin, I was elected as the lead candidate

for my party ahead of the European elections. On that day, I stood side by side with a certain Michel Barnier. We were running together, not he against me, not me against him, but I won. I am delighted that, four years on, we are back, Michel and myself, here in Ireland still standing together. He is a loyal friend to me, to our Union and to your nation.

Ever since it took its rightful place in our Union some 45 years ago, Ireland has acted like a founding member state and often more than some founding member states themselves. You have always sought the European approach, understanding that what is good for all in our Union is good for us all individually.

Ireland, itself, has come a long way in that time. It went from a small, mainly agricultural economy to a thriving Celtic tiger in the 1990s and in the 2000s and thanks to difficult, tough decisions following the crisis, the economy is now more than back on its feet. The crisis took its toll on citizens and businesses alike but together, you have managed to turn the country around. Growth is projected at 5.8% this year, the second fastest anywhere in Europe, and unemployment is set to drop to less than 5% next year. Ireland has become a pioneer of the digital world and is now a hub for some of the world's best innovators and entrepreneurs. This reflects just how much this country has embraced the modern world.

It is now the most youthful country in our Union with a median age almost ten years younger than that of Germany and Italy. It is the most optimistic country in our Union with the highest proportion of people with a positive image of the European Union anywhere in Europe. I have to tell the one who wrote this speech that the approval of the European Union is even higher in Luxembourg than in Ireland but they are always treating Luxembourg with benign neglect - that is the reason I had to complete what he or she has so well done.

Ireland is the most globalised country in our Union thanks to its open nature and high level of economic and social integration with the rest of the world and it is a country that is undergoing a more profound transformation with more than half Ireland's population not born at the time of the decision to join the European Union. The recent referendums on marriage equality and abortion reflect a deeper shift in societal views, a shift that would not have been contemplated even a generation ago. Both of these issues were approved decisively and clearly by the people. To quote George Bernard Shaw, "Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything." This sums up the transformation this country has undergone.

Perhaps the biggest change of all is that today's children can grow up in a peaceful land. That is, first and foremost, down to the people who live on this island but it is also true that this long and winding path to peace was greatly supported by European Union membership. From 1973 onwards, both Ireland and the UK worked together on European issues, dialogue returned, relations slowly started to thaw and over time, co-operation, compromise and mutual respect replaced suspicion, scepticism and mutual distrust. This is the European Union at its best, building bridges and working for peace and it shows what it means to be a member of our Union. It means agreeing to settle conflicts around a table rather than with arms. It means designing and abiding by rules to build trust and confidence between us. It means voluntarily pooling our sovereignty to make ourselves stronger. It means speaking with one voice in an increasingly volatile and unstable world and it means having the weight of 26 other partners united behind you when you need it the most. This is what Ireland can rely on, both today and in the future.

Nowhere is this more important than when it comes to the withdrawal of the United King-

dom. Two years ago this week, the British people made a sovereign decision to leave our Union. I wish they had made a different one but it is their decision and I respect it fully. However, other member states and Ireland in particular, should not pay the price for that choice. This is why, when it comes to Brexit, I have always said that it is a case of Ireland first. We have made much progress in negotiations, notably on issues linked to the orderly withdrawal of the United Kingdom, but we are not yet there. The hardest parts are still to do and there is not much time left to find a concrete agreement.

On Ireland, both sides agree on the main principles. There should be no return of a hard border. We need common rules to preserve North-South co-operation. Most importantly, this means the Good Friday Agreement should be preserved in its entirety - every line, every letter.

Twenty years ago, 94% of the people in Ireland and 71% in Northern Ireland endorsed this agreement. They voted overwhelmingly for peace and peace is what it has delivered, built on trust, fairness, equality, the rule of law and democracy. Whether one lives in Derry or in Donegal, the Border has been out of sight and out of mind for 20 years and that is how it must stay.

That is why we have put forward clear proposals, including a backstop option to safeguard the Good Friday Agreement and ensure there will be no hard border. The backstop is bespoke and a workable solution. It has been designed for Northern Ireland and to uphold its constitutional status, but this tailored solution for Northern Ireland cannot fit the whole of the United Kingdom. It covers all necessary customs and regulatory controls to avoid a hard border and does not jeopardise future relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The United Kingdom's proposals for a temporary customs arrangement show a certain willingness to make progress, but they do not, for instance, show how a regulatory alignment would work. In practice, they authorise a number of new questions such as how the backstop can have an expiration date if the commitment to having no hard border does not. We have less than ten months to Brexit and need more answers and fewer new questions.

We will continue - my friend Michel Barnier, me and others - to take a pragmatic approach to finding solutions, but I also want to be clear - Ireland will come first. There are those who think the other 26 countries will abandon Ireland at the last minute for a separate deal that suits them. Those people have not understood what being part of our Union means. Ireland's border is Europe's border and our Union's priority.

Of course, it is in everyone's interests for the United Kingdom and the European Union to stay as close as possible and be friends, partners and allies. The reality is that there is no arrangement outside the European Union which is as good as membership. It simply does not exist. Instead, our goal is to secure the next best option for both sides. With pragmatism comes realism. As the clock ticks down to Brexit, we must prepare for every eventuality, including no deal. This is neither a desired nor a likely outcome, but it is not an impossible one and we are getting ready just in case. We will use all tools at our disposal which could have a cushioning impact. The new long-term budget for our Union from 2021 onwards has an in-built flexibility that could allow us to redirect funds if the situation arose. We will also earmark €120 million for a new PEACE programme, a programme which has done so much in breaking down barriers between communities in Northern Ireland and the Border counties. I see no better use of the European budget than finalising peace and community values. In all cases I reaffirm our commitment that a united Europe will support Ireland every step of the way and that this unity is more important and relevant than ever, given the increasingly fragile and fractured world

around us.

Ten days ago I was in Canada for the G7 summit. It was a moment of reality for the international rules based order Europe and the United States did so much to build. The United States is a special partner for Ireland. Your shared history goes deeper than most. The very house in which we are standing today was the model for the White House and the United States will continue to be a special partner for Europe too. We make each other safer, more secure and prosperous, but at the same time we must stand firm for the rules and values in which we believe. We must take on the mantle of leadership. That is what we are doing on climate change and nuclear weapons in Iran. We have made a commitment because it is good for us and good for the world and we will stick to those commitments.

That is what we must also do when it comes to free and fair trade. The trade in which we believe is built on rules, trust and a reliable partnership. The United States' decision to impose tariffs on Europe goes against this. In fact, it goes against all logic and history and our response must be clear but measured. We will do what we have to do to rebalance and safeguard, but at the same time, we will move forward in new partnerships with like-minded countries. It makes sense for us and our economy. Our trade agreement with Canada, for instance, removes duties on 98% of the products we buy from and sell to one another. The agreement with Japan which will be signed in July will be a real opportunity for Irish farmers, in particular. Ireland exports over 40,000 tonnes of beef to Japan every year, at a tariff of 38.5%. The new agreement will reduce this figure drastically, further opening up a market of 125 million people. We have just concluded an agreement with Mexico and now have the green light to start negotiations with Australia and New Zealand. In each case we have a clear mandate from all member states and the European Parliament and will insist on a balanced outcome for all, including agriculture and all other important sectors. These agreements are not only good for our economy but they also help us to export our standards and values. They make food with care for all.

Our values also extend to the digital world. Rules that apply offline should also apply online, especially when it comes to paying a fair share of tax on profits made. The truth is that our tax laws have not kept up with the pace of change. They were designed in a world where digital companies did not yet really figure. Today nine of the top 20 largest companies in the world are digital. This shows the economic potential of digital companies, but with profits comes the duty to pay taxes. The amounts that are going untaxed are both unsustainable and unacceptable. I know that this is a difficult issue in this country. Sometimes when I am listening to debates here, I fall back to the Luxembourg Parliament because in Luxembourg we have exactly the same debates, but from time to time people have to change their minds if they want to change reality. As with any digital issue, the taxation problem is a global challenge. We are working with our partners across the world to find a solution on which we all agree. In the meantime we must equip member states to tax profits when they are made in their countries, even if a company does not have a physical presence there. As with trade, the digital world is an opportunity for Europe to lead and set an example.

The truth is that recent events are a sharp reminder of the need for European unity if our voices are to be heard on the world stage. Mr. Speaker and honorary Members, it was Oscar Wilde's Algernon who said it best when he said, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple." The truth of today's world is neither pure nor simple. On the one hand, the case for real co-operation is stronger than ever and, on the other, we see a temptation on the part of some to go it alone. In the face of that truth, we all face a choice - unite around our common values and work for our common good or each of us spin off and get what we can. Europe has already

made its choice - we will stay united, whether it be on Brexit, trade, Iran or climate change. I am delighted that last year's global Ireland strategy presented by the Taoiseach made exactly this commitment. It is the image of modern Ireland. I count on you to ensure Europe will stay at the heart of Ireland and you can count on me that Ireland will stay at the heart of Europe.

I greet respectfully all of the former Ministers I have met during my long life, veterans and others. Thank you for listening. I am happy to be here.

Members applauded.

The Taoiseach: A Cheann Chomhairle, a Chathaoirligh, President Juncker, distinguished members, it is an honour to lead the responses at this joint sitting for President Juncker's speech. Let me begin by thanking the Commission President for his fine contribution. Four years ago, President Juncker was chosen by the European Peoples' Party, EPP, a party of which Fine Gael is a member, as candidate for the Commission Presidency here in Dublin. Since taking office in November 2014, President Juncker has repaid in full the trust placed in him by that year's EPP Congress.

The three values he highlighted at the start of his tenure were experienced and efficient leadership, solidarity among people and nations and a strong vision for the future. Those values have come to epitomise the Juncker Commission. Having served as President of the Eurogroup from 2005 to 2013, he played a central role in leading Europe safely out of the financial crisis and intact. His careful stewardship of the post-crisis period is reflected in the favourable economic climate across Europe today: rates of economic growth are at a ten-year high, unemployment is at a ten-year low and interest rates and inflation are low. The European economy has so far created over 8 million new jobs during the President's mandate. We have the highest levels of employment ever recorded, not just here in Ireland but also in the European Union. Today, there are 238 million men and women in employment in the EU 28, including over 157 million in the euro area. Investment has returned, debt burdens are easing, public finances are back close to balance and 2018 looks set to be the first year since the beginning of economic and monetary union in which all member states will manage budget deficits of less than 3% of gross domestic product, GDP.

When Luxembourg held the Presidency of the European Council in 2005, President Juncker designed the Stability and Growth Pact. Although it has taken a little longer than any of us anticipated, the arrival of balanced budgets is an important milestone. If the European ideal is to be meaningful, it must always be about improving the living standards of our citizens. As a Prime Minister, re-elected many times, President Juncker understood this from the beginning. That is why last October's agreement on the European Pillar of Social Rights is so important and will surely rank among his finest achievements, although as was the case with the Stability and Growth Pact it may take time before we see the real value of that in people's lives.

President Juncker has created a political compass that will help guide our collective actions in the years ahead. At both national and EU levels, the social pillar will help us chart the best course in dealing with the challenges that come with globalisation in the 21st century. Best of all, it will enable all our citizens to participate effectively in a world of such rapid change. We share a vision of how to support vibrant rural communities, the beating heart of so many countries. EU agricultural and rural development policies keep that lifeblood flowing. So it is with particular pleasure that I acknowledge the distinguished role played by our own Commissioner, Phil Hogan, in keeping this portfolio firmly at the top of the EU's political agenda. That

includes preparing for the post-2020 European budget.

Not that long ago, some people, including some in this House, claimed that European policies were damaging our economy and delaying our recovery. Events since then have provided the strongest rebuttal. It has become clear that the European Union is the strongest bulwark we have for an open, rules-based multilateral order. Given events in the United States it has never been more important that we as Europeans stand strongly together. Seventy years ago, the European ideal was created out of the fires of a Continent that had been ravaged and destroyed by hatred and conflict after two world wars, in fact centuries of war. It was built on a dream for a future that few believed was possible. A vision of a better Europe, it succeeded in bringing peace and prosperity to a Continent. By creating the circumstances for economic growth and opportunities, it also secured personal and political freedoms thus providing the framework for Ireland to develop economically, socially, culturally and politically.

Over that period within the EU member states, every generation faced its own challenges and each generation overcame them. This generation faces many challenges, not least the challenge of Brexit, which is starting to resemble a riddle wrapped in an enigma. History will record the important role President Juncker has played at this very difficult time. In recent years we have had many upheavals such as the rise of populism and euroscepticism, nationalism and anti-democratic forces. Nonetheless our Union has retained its solidarity, supported by a renewed sense of purpose. The European Union is a union of laws and treaties, which can occasionally be difficult to navigate and sometimes cumbersome but it is at its purest and simplest when upholding our shared values: respect for human dignity, personal and economic freedom, democracy, equality before the law, the rule of law and human rights, commitment to peace and multilateralism and free trade and free markets. In Ireland we believe that these values are fundamental and irreducible and must always be defended. They cannot be taken for granted. The vision that delivered peace in Europe opened the door to peace in Ireland, removing borders, bringing people together and integrating economies. For us, Europe enabled our transformation from being a country on the periphery of the Continent, to an island at the centre of the world, at the heart of the common European home that we helped to build. As President Juncker said, we are perhaps not officially a founder member but a country that feels itself to be a founder member.

The great challenge we face on this island is to unwrap the enigma and solve the riddle of Brexit. It is as tricky as it sounds, so we are grateful for the diligence and understanding shown by the Commission's lead negotiator, Michel Barnier, in his conduct of these very difficult negotiations on behalf of the EU. Mr. Barnier, from all of us: you are very welcome back to this House and once again on behalf of the Irish people we thank you.

We all in this House recognise that Brexit poses unique and particular challenges for this country. We want to ensure that the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom is as close, comprehensive and ambitious as possible. That is in our interests and the interests of the EU as a whole. I believe it is in the interests of the United Kingdom as well. We want to move into the detailed negotiations about that relationship as soon as possible. However, the backstop for the Irish Border, agreed in December, must be legally operative in the withdrawal agreement, to apply "unless and until" an alternative solution is agreed. The Good Friday Agreement was made possible by shared membership of the European Union and the Single Market. It removed borders and differences between us. The removal of that foundation leaves us no less determined to protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts and in all that flows from it, peace in Britain and Ireland, power-sharing in Northern Ireland and ever

closer cooperation between North and South. We are deeply grateful for the remarkable solidarity and support we have received from the EU institutions and fellow member states, none more so than from President Juncker and his team. There has been consistent recognition of the unique position of Northern Ireland and the unique situation in which it has been put by the decision of the UK to leave the European Union. There is no stronger evidence of how small countries benefit so much from EU membership and how membership matters.

In the 19th century, the great Luxembourg poet, Michel Rodange, used the character of Renert the Fox to satirise those who thought only of themselves and exploited those around them. It is a useful way of thinking about these challenges. In the 21st century we must reject the cynicism of self-interest and approach the most pressing issues of our time in a spirit of mutual interest, trust and affection. In this, the European Union can lead by example. The moral and political compass of President Juncker has helped to provide direction for Europe, creating more opportunities for our citizens and a better future for all. I extend my special thanks again today to Commission President Juncker, a longstanding friend of Ireland.

Tá áthas orm a bheith in ann mórghuíochoas a ghabháil le hUachtarán an Choimisiúin, an tUasal Juncker, buanchara d'Éire le fada. Chuir treoir mhorálta agus pholaitiúil Uachtarán Juncker go mór le maoirseacht láidir na hEorpa, rud a chruthaigh níos mó deiseanna d'ár saoránaigh agus todhchaí níos gile do chách.

Your proven commitment to the European ideal will always find a home here and our friendship will be steadfast as we work together for a better Europe.

Deputy Micheál Martin: President Juncker, on behalf of the Fianna Fáil Party and on my own behalf, I am very pleased to join with the Ceann Comhairle and the Taoiseach in welcoming you to the Oireachtas and to thank you for your openness to holding this dialogue with us. We remember many years of co-operation with President Juncker both in the European Council and in ECOFIN. While we were not always on the same side of specific issues we never doubted his commitment to the fundamental European ideal of shared progress. His background as a leader of a small nation, which has also struggled over many centuries to secure its sovereignty and identity, always demonstrated itself in what we saw as a sincere interest in Ireland and its concerns. His visit to the Oireachtas comes at a critical moment for the world in general and for the European Union in particular. Dealing with the fallout of the Brexit vote is quite rightly the focus of his visit and our principal concern. However, it would be wrong for Brexit to exclude discussion of other issues fundamental to the future of the European Union and Ireland's position within it.

As a starting point, we believe that it is important for President Juncker to understand that Ireland's commitment to Europe is not a selfish or opportunistic one; it is fundamental to who we are. In fact, the European context has been central to the very development of the democratic republicanism which is the strongest political tradition on this island. At different points in our history our link to Europe was the lifeline by which many distinct aspects of our culture were preserved. At every stage, the development of our struggle for independence was influenced by contemporary European ideas and events.

Last weekend the people of Wexford in the south east commemorated a major battle which took place on this day 220 years ago. The Irish rebels of 1798 took to the field in what was the only major popular uprising in Europe in favour of the ideals of the French Revolution. It was the Tree of Liberty which inspired them, not a narrow vision of a defensive nation. This Euro-

pean context to our political and cultural revival continued to be a vibrant factor long after that.

The generation which fought for our independence a century ago was also deeply international in its beliefs and this State is one of the few in the world whose revolutionary founders insisted on the role of international law. Our Constitution, adopted by popular referendum in 1937, states this is a country which believes in co-operation with others and respects the fact that international agreements can limit national action. The father of our involvement in European integration, the former Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, first talked about the need for a formal economic and political co-operation in Europe as a young man as he sat in prison for his revolutionary activities. Therefore, Ireland's commitment to the founding principles of what is now the European Union goes back much further than 45 years and I can assure President Juncker that it is as strong today as it has ever been. That is why my party believes that the reform and development of the European Union should be a defining priority.

The Union is threatened by many forces. All of these are determined to try to damage an organisation they see as standing in the way of their profoundly anti-democratic, extreme and populist agendas. In the face of this, the Union has critical weaknesses which must be addressed. We strongly support proposals to complete the banking union, an essential protection against a recurrence of the financial crisis. We also believe that the Union must have a substantial financial backstop to help regions and countries in difficulty. There is no other way of preventing new sovereign debt crises from emerging.

In regard to the Union's budget, the current budget is simply too small to fulfil more than a few of the responsibilities placed on the Union. We welcome the proposals for an expanded budget more focused on sustainable economic development; however, we would caution President Juncker that attempts to fund this by undermining existing successful programmes is not acceptable. It must also be said that the Union cannot expect countries to lose all of their remaining fiscal and economic levers in the name of harmonisation. I know that he has personally set out an ambitious programme of reform and development and we wish him well with this.

Brexit is, at its heart, a challenge to the fundamental principle of solidarity within the Union. Britain has rejected the idea that it should submit to binding rules or recognise the benefits of compromise. In the negotiations, the Union must continue to protect the interests of members who will be worst hit by the British decision and it must maintain the principle that there has to be sustainable prosperity for all members. The negotiating guidelines agreed last year and those matters which have been agreed so far represent a robust and reasonable approach by the Union.

We would like to acknowledge the lengths to which Michel Barnier's team has gone to protect Ireland's interests from the earliest discussions onwards. This includes an accessibility and transparency which has meant that for Opposition parties here, a key source of information on the negotiations has been the Commission. We also thank Commissioner Hogan for his co-operation and assistance in that regard.

It is important for President Juncker to understand that there is a considerable and growing unease about the failure to move from generalities to concrete and final agreements in the negotiations. There comes a point where we will have to stop shaking our heads at the undoubted incompetence and incoherence of London's position. The exotic edges of the Tory party have long since stopped being amusing, no matter how absurd their cast of characters is. The simple fact today is that London may actually never come up with a credible proposal. The core con-

traditions in December's text remain unaddressed. Prime Minister May's letter on this matter at the last summit simply restated that her Government is in favour of both a soft border and not introducing any trade or other barriers within the UK. This position is indistinguishable from her Government's stated position for the last 18 months. We are extremely concerned with how negotiations on the Irish text have now been linked with the overall withdrawal treaty text and its provisions for final status negotiations. An outcome where there is ongoing regulatory alignment North and South and where Northern Ireland has effective access to both the customs union and the Single Market is one which we fully support.

The current proposal for a deep free trade agreement actually represents the second-worst scenario in the economic review commissioned by our Government, with certain agrifood sectors and the services sector as a whole being particularly badly hit. This review suggests a permanent loss of €2,500 per person, a level on par with the hit to the British economy. Therefore, the need to help our businesses to diversify in terms of both products and markets is more urgent than ever. We have no doubt that the Commission will need to come forward with proposals for support programmes for the worst-hit regions and industries and that a temporary and targeted exemption from state aid rules will be required.

In the short time available I have tried to give President Juncker some background to how we are approaching both limiting the damage of Brexit and, more importantly, supporting a European Union which is more dynamic and effective. Let me assure President Juncker that he can safely ignore the reports that there is any question about the stability of the core Irish political consensus and mandate on Brexit. These reports stem from short-term political manoeuvring and have no substance to them.

At this critical moment in history Ireland stands with Europe in a spirit of determination, co-operation and solidarity. There is an enormous series of hurdles to overcome in the months and years ahead, but if we all show the necessary urgency and ambition I have no doubt that the European Union can be as much a force for peace and progress in this century as it was in the last.

Ar son ár bpáirtí agus ar mo shon féin cuirim fíorfháilte roimh an Uachtarán chuig ár bParlaimint inniu. Táimid fíorbhuíoch dó as ucht teacht chun labhairt linn agus éisteacht linn.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Cuirim céad míle fáilte roimh Uachtarán Juncker. On my own behalf and on behalf of Sinn Féin I extend a very warm welcome to President Jean-Claude Juncker on his heroic return to the city of Dublin. Mr. Juncker has asked us to hang onto and weigh each of his words carefully and I have followed his advice. I am happy to respond, as we meet at this crucial time for Ireland in the course of Brexit negotiations.

As has already been reflected upon, Brexit is perhaps the greatest threat or challenge to our island in a generation. It is a threat to our peace agreements, our peace process, our stability, our prosperity and to the rights of Irish citizens, North and South. The potential for Brexit to cost jobs, to damage our industry and to damage and endanger the welfare of our people cannot be overstated.

Brexit is best understood as a Tory vanity project. It certainly was not designed to emancipate the masses. The Tories regarded the working time directive as a menace to democratic freedoms, so any suggestion that such a political mindset had any real intention of making a difference for the working class and the common good in Britain or anywhere else is entirely misguided.

We need to acknowledge that mistakes and failures in the European project have bolstered the arguments of those who argued for Brexit, and they succeeded. I put it to President Juncker that the economic dogma of the market above all else has alienated citizens and that this needs to be acknowledged. The increasing militarisation of our European Union, the democratic deficit, the distance between the core and the periphery, the distance between larger member states and smaller member states and the onward march towards federalisation by stealth are all legitimate matters of concern. The case for a very radical reform is now unanswerable. This is not simply a case of more Europe, it is in fact a plea for better Europe, for a Europe that commits itself to social solidarity, democracy, fair play and a sense that the citizens are in charge and have ownership of this thing we call the European project. For this to happen the establishment and the politicians need to give way and make space.

I hope that when we reflect on the experience of Brexit that we will have the collective wisdom, from whatever political perspective we come, to reflect collectively and take Shaw's advice that to mark progress we need to challenge our thinking. Europe, on many central issues, needs to change not just its mind but also change its direction.

Whatever way we come at these things, I believe we can agree that Brexit is a disaster and especially for those of us in Ireland. The Tory Brexiteers held their entire debate without any reference at all to Ireland. This arrogant and detached attitude has persisted in these negotiations. Mrs. May and her Government have yet to put forward any realistic or workable proposals. Instead, the Brexit policy of the British Government remains littered with longstanding contradictions. The Tories claim that they are committed to avoiding a hard border, but they remain intent on dragging the North of Ireland out of the European Union, the customs union and the Single Market. They claim there is no threat to the Good Friday Agreement whilst undermining that very agreement and ignoring the fact that there are 142 areas of cross-Border co-operation that will be adversely impacted. The British Government insists that the rights of people living in the North will not be eroded. That is disingenuous, as the Tory Brexiteers are insisting the North leaves the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, and perhaps worse, sets out a scenario of withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights and that court.

Sinn Féin has highlighted these fundamental contradictions many times, not least when our friend Mr. Michel Barnier addressed these Houses. That was more than one year ago and yet these matters remain unresolved to this day. The outworking of these unresolved contradictions in British policy is absolutely clear. As it stands, the British position would impose a hard border on our island. This is a fact. As it stands the British position would erect barriers to east-west trade. This is a fact. As it stands, British policy is to undermine and damage the Good Friday Agreement. That is a fact. These are regrettable and unacceptable facts.

Last December the people of Ireland were told that we had a cast-iron guarantee that all of what I have described would not happen, and that in the event of a no-deal scenario there would be no hard border on our island, no diminution of citizens' rights and no damage to the Good Friday Agreement. The backstop was to be our insurance policy to prevent the imposition of World Trade Organization trading rules if negotiations ended without a comprehensive agreement. We were told that this draft agreement would be converted into a legally binding text in March. This did not happen. The British Government delayed and distracted with nonsensical non-proposals and it refused to commit. Instead, earlier this month and as a last minute effort perhaps to spare its blushes, the British Government dreamt up another proposal that would scrap the backstop proposal that was agreed in December and that would leave our island with

zero legal assurances. I am sure that I do not have to say it to President Juncker that it is absolutely essential that we have not just words and kind sentiment; we need legal protection.

I ask that President Juncker publishes the promised annexe to the backstop that would set out the protection of citizens' rights. This is in the gift of the European side and it would be helpful and reassuring for us to see it. Sinn Féin has argued, and there is a wide consensus, as to what Ireland needs. We need the North to remain in the customs union and the Single Market. We need to ensure that the rights of citizens, particularly the citizens living in the North of Ireland, are protected and acknowledged. Irrespective of the wilder ramblings and rantings of exotic Tories, we need to ensure that our peace agreement is respected in full: every letter, every dot and every comma.

I am happy to hear President Juncker reiterating a policy of Ireland first, but when I met the British Prime Minister yesterday she set out a policy of Ireland last, if at all. It seems clear that British policy and tactics are to run down the clock and to delay and delay again. We are most disappointed that, despite an assurance that the Irish question would be answered in advance of setting out the details of the new relationship that Britain wishes to foster with the European Union, this has not happened. It is dangerous for us and brings jeopardy to us if the British are allowed to go into the European Council meeting at the end of this month, refuse to agree on or answer the Irish question, and emerge with something of a diplomatic triumph in a statement that we will move to the next phase of the negotiations. I have shared this view explicitly with our colleagues in government. At the Council meeting, the British Government needs to be called out on its antics and the position of Ireland first that President Juncker referenced needs to be explicitly stated to Ms May. It needs to be made clear that the British Government will not roll the Irish question into its new relationship in an attempt to pressurise this country into accepting a bad and potentially calamitous deal for the island of Ireland.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is clear that the Brexiteers still cannot agree what Brexit means, much less what it looks like. That is their problem and cannot be ours. The upcoming Council meeting cannot simply be another exercise in kicking the can down the road. This is crunch time. In the absence of the British demonstrating how they would avoid a hard border, uphold the Good Friday Agreement and protect citizens' rights, it is reckless to allow talks to progress to the next phase. I ask President Juncker and Mr. Barnier to please not make that mistake. The future of the people living on this island is on the line, and history will not judge kindly anyone who decides to ignore the import of this reality. History remains the business of tomorrow and it can be shaped by the decisions that we make today. The present provides us with the opportunity to do the right and responsible thing. The position of Ireland first and Ireland now articulated by President Donald Tusk and President Juncker must be the guiding principle for the European Union team. That is the duty of the EU and the Irish Government. I hope the EU does not blink and fulfils this mission.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: A Cheann Comhairle, a Chathaoirligh, Monsieur le Président, I join others in welcoming President Juncker and his colleagues, Mr. Michel Barnier and Commissioner Hogan, to the House for an important interaction at a crucial juncture in our history. I have a mere four minutes to set out a few ideas on behalf of my party, the Labour Party.

When the Irish economy collapsed in 2008, our National Economic and Social Council produced an important report, entitled "Ireland's Five-Part Crisis: An Integrated National Re-

sponse". The five parts were banking, our tax base, the economy generally, the social impact and implications, and Ireland's reputation. The core recommendation of that analysis was for an integrated response. That is exactly what the European Union needs now. We are facing several major crises simultaneously across Europe, specifically Brexit, migration, populism, climate change, and new technologies displacing traditional, secure employment. Woven through all of these crises is public anxiety. We need to understand that people across Europe are afraid. They are afraid of being left behind by the global economy, of poverty in their old age and of their children having fewer opportunities than themselves. They are afraid that globalisation is out of control and the natural environment is being ruined forever. Populists are good at tapping into people's fears, but they do not offer solutions other than hate and the identification of others to blame. We in the EU's mainstream must show that we understand, comprehend and get the fears of our peoples. More important, we must show that we have a solution in our hands to address these problems.

As President Juncker has undoubtedly heard clearly time and again in the past two years, Ireland's immediate priority is Brexit. The United Kingdom's decision two years ago, compounded by its inability, unwillingness or both to set out an acceptable pathway to future relations between the UK and EU, presents us in Ireland with real and unique difficulties. I thank President Juncker for his words today. There are many who are suggesting that, without a deal that is clearly mapped out in legal terms before the June Council, we will be abandoned by some, if not all, of our European colleagues. That solidarity, expressed so clearly by President Juncker, is fundamentally important for us and the future of our Union.

However, we must also look through a wider lens than merely Brexit. Our industrial activity has disrupted the natural climate in the developing world as well as in our own countries. A social Europe would greatly increase our investment in these countries and help them to transform their economies. A Marshall plan for Europe's neighbourhood to create jobs and real opportunities at home and across the Middle East and Africa would make the dangerous and risky migration to Europe less attractive. A social Europe would also invest more in formerly industrialised regions of Europe, which are hotbeds of support for populism - every election has shown that, as did Brexit - after decades of economic decline. A social Europe would be more attractive to some in the British Labour Party, with whom I had detailed discussions last week and who see Brexit as an opportunity for state-led investment to counteract poverty and inequality. A social Europe would provide a strong safety net to empower people to experiment with new forms of work and new fields of economic activity to compensate for the rise of robotisation. A social Europe would recognise that we cannot measure or understand public anxieties through crude socioeconomic statistics like GDP or even our own unique GNI*.

We need to better understand people's states of mind and comprehend and address their fears. We have the means to address them if we have the will. Are we willing to put sufficient investment into making an immediate difference in people's lives? That would require a new approach. Our challenge, one which can be met, is to agree how to fund the needed investment in a sustainable way. However, what are needed now, above all, are real and practical demonstrations of European solidarity.

An Ceann Comhairle: Next is Deputy Boyd Barrett who is sharing time with Deputy Barry.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will be brief as my time is short. People Before Profit and Solidarity are thorough internationalists. As such, we have no faith in the petty xenophobic

nationalism of the British Tory Party and no trust that it will deal with the issue of the Border to ensure that no hard border is reimposed. My question is how can we trust you, President Juncker. The European Union shoved €60 billion worth of toxic banking debt down the throats of the Irish people and we are still dealing with the consequences, with dire housing and health crises. The European Union has allowed 15,000 desperate migrants to drown in the Mediterranean Sea because of its fortress Europe policies-----

A Deputy: Shame.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----which it is escalating. Why should we trust President Juncker with our Border or the interests of the people in this country? I have a simple question about the Border. If negotiations fail and collapse with the Tory Government on the exit agreement, we know that we cannot trust Theresa May with the Border. Will President Juncker give us a clear commitment that the European Union will not impose a border, customs posts or any other infrastructure of a frontier to protect the European borders in the way he is doing to the detriment and loss of life of people in the Mediterranean? That is the question. We do not trust the Tories. Can we trust you?

Mr. Jean-Claude Juncker: Yes.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No border, under any circumstances.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Barry. We have limited time. Can we have order for Deputy Barry, please?

Deputy Mick Barry: Other Deputies have chosen to address President Juncker primarily on the issue of Brexit. I choose to address him on an issue no less important, which is now an emergency in Irish society. There is a housing emergency here. Rents skyrocket and 10,000 are officially homeless. More than 500,000 young people are locked out of the housing market, unable to afford rents, let alone being able to afford the purchase of their own home. The Irish State has billions of euro in the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund and in the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA. We need to spend this money on social housing. This is where President Juncker comes in. We are told again and again that the money cannot be spent because it would breach the EU fiscal rules that he helped to design, that it would breach the expenditure benchmark and it cannot be done on the balance sheet. If our parliamentary grouping held the reins, we would build the houses and break President Juncker's fiscal rules-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mick Barry: -----but we do not hold the reins yet so instead I ask him to relax those rules. He should agree to relax those rules to allow the emergency to be addressed before a social explosion takes place in Ireland on this issue.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá fáilte chroíúil faighte ag an Uachtarán i Seomra an daonlathais inniu agus tá sé sin ceart agus cóir. Ní hionann an dá rud: fáilte chroíúil agus a rá go bhfuilimid go léir den tuairim chéanna ó thaobh an treo a bhfuil an tAontas Eorpach ag dul, go háirithe ó thaobh cúrsaí daonlathais de, cúrsaí teifeach agus cúrsaí míleata. Tuigean an tír seo an focal meitheal, daoine ag teacht le chéile ar son leas an phobail, b'shin bunús Chomhphobal Eacnamaíoch na hEorpa, nuair a cuireadh tús leis. Tá an togra sin, áfach, imithe chomh fada ón mbunphrionsabal sin nach féidir glacadh leis. Táimid anseo an lá i ndiaidh Lá Idirnáisiúnta na dTeifeach. Ó na figiúiri atá agam, 2017, bhí trí mhillún

duine lasmuigh dá dtír féin. Chomh maith leis sin, tá 75 mhilliún teifeach ar fud an domhain.

Tá moladh tuillte ag an Uachtarán ar leibhéal amháin, mar is fear díreach thú, agus tá sé ráite agat go bhfuil gá le harm Eorpach. Chomh maith leis sin tá sé ráite agat gurb é an tUasal Viktor Orbán an deachtóir is ansa leat. Tá sé sin díreach. Tá a fhios againn cá seasaimid.

President of the Commission, you are welcome here today and have received a very hearty welcome. It is not the same thing as saying that we are all of the same opinion about where Europe is going, with its increased spending on defence and going down the road of a European army, which Mr. Juncker has clearly articulated. He has also indicated that the Prime Minister of Hungary is his favourite dictator. Today or yesterday, it was just confirmed that legislation has been passed in the Hungarian Parliament, telling the people that it will be a criminal offence if they help somebody who is seeking asylum. We are also seriously worried about the state of democracy in Europe. If we are to learn anything about Brexit, which certainly poses an enormous challenge for this country but a positive one with solutions, it is to realise that many of the countries in Europe, including Ireland, are saying that they are unhappy with the way democracy is happening in Europe in their name. When we go back to the Lisbon treaty, it includes a specific article that said decisions should be taken as near to the people as possible. We have entirely left that principle. There is also the principle of “do no harm”, the precautionary principle. We are certainly not doing that either. Later this month, I understand there will be a meeting of the leaders of Europe about a policy of containing refugees, a policy of disembarkation before returning them. I am certainly a committed European. There are intimate connections between my family and various countries in Europe but I will not stand over a European Union that is going down the militarisation route, a European army and putting vast amounts of money into a European defence fund and agency, while at the same time becoming a fortress Europe. Yesterday, we condemned the President of the United States, rightly so, with a unanimous motion. I condemn the European Union in the same manner for our approach to militarisation and refugees. It is a scandal.

Tá tuiscint faoi leith ag an tír seo ó thaobh teifeach de, na milliúin duine a d’fhág an tír seo, bliain i ndiaidh bliana, tá an-tuiscint againn. Do not do this in our name. We will not have a fortress Europe. We want to welcome people in. We want a different type of Europe, a democratic Europe, on every level. President Juncker is ignoring our neutrality, the rules of the European Union that talk about opening and welcoming policies and on making decisions as close as possible to the people on the ground. Tá fáilte roimh an Uachtarán, ach dúirt sé linn éisteacht leis. Tá mise ag rá leis éisteacht linn faoi na rudaí a bhfuilimid buartha faoi. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On behalf of the Rural Independent Group, I want to welcome you, Mr. Juncker, and your delegation to our Parliament. We want to work with Mr. Juncker and our European partners to advance the hard-won peace, economic stability and future of our State. We recognise that the challenges are many and diverse, each requiring sustained and complex negotiations. We hope that EU will display a more conciliatory attitude toward our friends in the United Kingdom who are seeking in all sincerity to have their democratic vote honoured in the best way possible. Some of the recent language from the European Union has seemed purposefully designed to create a sense of division between this State and our nearest neighbour. We do not want that. We want to work closely with our allies and in particular with our trading partners in the UK. Entire sectors of the Irish agri-sector are being exposed due to the inability or unwillingness of the EU and the UK to nurture a deal that will be acceptable to all. As President Juncker’s colleague, Mr. Barnier, stated some time ago, we are working on

an international agreement between the UK and the EU that will seek the precision, rigour and legal certainty that is required for all international agreements. That is what we want here.

We must have clarity and legal certainty to sustain peace, remove any option of a hard border and respect the unique exposures Ireland will face in the years ahead.

Recently I travelled between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, as I do regularly, and found it frightening to see a vast, newly constructed border compound. The delays are significant for those involved in tourism and transport and everybody else. My question is similar to that asked by others. How can it be so different here if there is to be a border between the Republic and Northern Ireland? I ask the President to address that issue also.

Like Deputy Catherine Connolly, I have concerns about the militarisation of the European Union. That is not what we joined for. The European Union is moving further away from the people I represent and the people we all represent here. That is a problem not only in Ireland but also, as we can see, in many other European countries.

There are many issues to be addressed. Reference was made to the heavy hand and coercing people to listen. Deputy Catherine Connolly used the phrase “Bí ag éisteacht”. We need the President to listen. We need him to have empathy in dealing with our problems. We did not get a good ear when we had our problems following the banking collapse. We got very rough justice from our European friends. We are paying back and our grandchildren will also be paying back. There are many issues that need to be addressed sensitively and with more respect for the electorate in each of the independent states.

I wish the President an enjoyable time during his trip and hope he will take away the message that it is not all rosy in the garden and wonderful, as some parties here would like to make it appear. There are many issues and many people are suffering as a result of the European Union’s inability or unwillingness to help us in our hour of need.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I also extend a warm welcome to the President who opened his address by speaking very positively about the nature of our membership of the European Union. It was understood it was about the pooling of sovereignty. While there continues to be a very strong commitment to membership of the European Union, that confidence was badly shattered during the economic crash when there was a feeling there was an intergovernmental approach whereby each individual country looked to itself and we felt very isolated. That experience has resulted in scepticism about Ireland coming first in the Brexit negotiations. Therefore, we need to deal in realities, not just hopes.

The President talked about the possibility of there being no deal. Will he expand on exactly what he means in terms of how it might play out? It will impact on every country, but no country will be impacted on more than Ireland. We know that eleventh hour negotiations are about compromise. There is a playing for time to create that scenario in the case of the British Government.

Our focus is on survival, but the focus needs to move to something more than survival where we will see a more democratic European Union that will not be undermined by populism. There are very real issues which are about inequality and a lack of democracy.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On the longest day I hope this will be the shortest speech. President Juncker will be glad to hear that it is the last one.

21 June 2018

I am a member of the Irish Green Party. It is an all-island party, North and South, and a proud member of the European Green Party.

How we deal with Brexit will reflect on the European Union as a whole. I met a group of Irish nationalists last week who made the valid point that the human rights elements of the Good Friday Agreement had been forgotten. If, as the Taoiseach said, we are setting a compass, we cannot have a compass that only just looks at trade. There are four points on the compass. We also need to look at the human rights elements of the Good Friday Agreement to make sure they will be protected. I heard the leader of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions say the protocols and all of the arrangements made to deal with the trade and customs issue ignored workers' rights. I know from my work in the Green movement that the protocols and all of the talk are also ignoring environmental rights in how we deal with Brexit and that must change.

Listening to President Juncker it seems clear that if there is a deal, we are facing having a border in the Irish Sea. That will present real challenges. Whatever happens in this process, if that is the outcome, I ask him to help us to work with our unionist friends in order that we will be able to manage the incredibly difficult task of operating much more as an island, which for me will be good, but it will not be easy.

We should be careful in the language we use. I am concerned about some of the language used here today in criticising nationalism in other countries. There was a slight tinge to the phrase "Ireland first". I use an Irish phrase instead: ní neart go cur le chéile - there is strength in unity. Our unity should continue with our friends in the United Kingdom. I was at Westminster yesterday talking to my colleagues in advance of the vote. I regret that they have had a vote, but everyone is aware of the interparliamentary relationship where we are on the best of terms with people of all parties in the United Kingdom. We have always got on well and should continue to do so. If it goes wrong, as seems to be the case, given that President Juncker has said there is now a chance of a crash-out and the prospect of no deal, I ask two things - first, that he keep open the prospect that the United Kingdom can revoke Article 50 should it change its mind in that regard. That may happen as late as early next year, depending on the Parliament. Second, I call for support for my colleague, Caroline Lucas, who will be one of the lead speakers at the people's march next weekend. The hope is that it will give rise to the prospect of a people's vote in which they might change their minds. We have done so in the past in two referendums on the European treaty. We know how to do it. The first thing is that one must not insult the people. One does not talk down to them. Ní neart go cur le chéile. A little decency might solve this problem more than anything else.

Senator Ian Marshall: I begin by echoing the warm welcome extended by my colleagues to President Juncker and our distinguished guests. As the only Northern Irish person who has the opportunity to speak today in this House, I address it on behalf of my fellow Independent Senators. I am extremely privileged that that honour has been bestowed on me. I make no apology that my opinions are prejudiced by the fact that I live and work in Northern Ireland. I am proud to be defined as Northern Irish, British, Irish and European, a truly complex cultural cocktail.

As someone who believes in and respects democracy, we need to consider how and why we have reached this place. A decision by the citizens of the United Kingdom based on the information available and their understanding of the implications of Brexit was taken at a point in time. It is one I respect. However, as a democrat, I need to ensure that whatever course of action we follow is representative of the views of the majority; that it reflects opinion now, not

two years ago; that it reflects opinion based on fact, not fantasy; that it reflects opinion based on reality and is not reckless; and, most important, that the opinion of the silent majority is expressed and represented.

Credit must go to all those who have contributed to the Brexit discussions, including those in Northern Ireland - all of the civic forum groups, lobby groups, politicians and members of the general public who are so frustrated by the lack of clarity at this late hour.

Northern Ireland's nearest neighbours are in this House today. Its biggest allies are here. In an era in which a focus is placed on fake news, we need to be aware that the fake news and spin being played out is that Dublin and Brussels are conspiring against the United Kingdom, but nothing is farther from the truth. The United Kingdom proposed a departure, which I hope will never materialise. Therefore, it must present some solutions. History will judge this period by assessing whether decisions so critical to the future of the United Kingdom and Ireland were taken in the absence of reason and rational thinking. It will judge whether the United Kingdom's position was based on a fair and balanced evaluation of the potential impact of Brexit; whether Brexit was used for political gain; whether the people were consulted and then and only then whether we made a decision to deliver for the future; whether we truly represented the interests of the generations to come and the young people eager to grow and develop as members of the largest community in the world. Leadership is not about the next election but the next generation. History has shown that strong leadership requires taking charge when one is placed in command. Former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower said it was not about the plan but about the planning because all plans change. The case of Brexit clearly demonstrates that changing circumstances and emerging information regarding its impact may mean the United Kingdom's plan will have to change. There is nothing Opposition politicians and headline hungry journalists like more than a government U-turn. However, as policy proposals are refined, negotiations and consultations progress and clarity is given to the potential impact of Brexit, it becomes much clearer that a review would be responsible, respectful and in the best interests of all concerned.

As stated, the position taken by the citizens of the UK on 23 June 2016 was based on information and knowledge available at that time. Hindsight is wonderful and with the benefit of hindsight and the information we now possess regarding the complexity of leaving the European Union and the less obvious or complete absence of clearly defined opportunities or dividends from Brexit, it would be sensible, if not imperative, to allow the Parliament and people of the UK to make a decision on support for or rejection of Brexit.

Strong leadership must be built on listening to the public as well as industry and expert opinion, rather than ploughing on blindly because changing tack would appear as a weakness in the eyes of one's critics. I am more convinced than ever that the European Union still presents the best opportunities for the UK, Ireland and Northern Ireland. I am completely convinced that the benefits of EU membership greatly outweigh any opportunity arising from the UK leaving the EU. It is clear today that Dublin and Brussels are working together to ensure that any implementation of a Brexit deal must work for London, Dublin and Brussels.

I have just finished reading a book which discusses globalisation. It states: "The tightening web of international connections erodes the independence of most countries." Collaboration is good and it is a natural phenomenon. This is a time for unity and not for division. There is more that unites us than divides us, as the murdered British MP, Jo Cox, argued. This is a time for strong leadership and clear vision.

Cathaoirleach an tSeanaid:: The final speaker, on behalf of the Seanad Civil Engagement group, is Senator Alice-Mary Higgins.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome President Juncker to the House. As he said, we have many passionate Europeans in Ireland. As one of those passionate Europeans, I believe I speak for many when I say we are concerned about the point at which we find ourselves in Europe and the period from which we have just emerged. During that period it seemed to many Europeans that market sentiment took precedence over public confidence. In some cases, alarm bells were ringing in the context of public confidence, as illustrated by the findings of Eurobarometer surveys. Failures of solidarity and in the language of solidarity between countries have contributed to stoking national and regional divisions. We have seen that long-term investment has, at times, been sublimated to short-term targets through rules such as those referenced earlier and austerity has strained our collective social fabric and damaged social cohesion.

I recognise and welcome the belated but important reassertion of the social pillar and its significance. However, if we have a new commitment to the social pillar, it must be made robust and actualised. A Europe of inclusion must include those with disabilities. My colleague, Senator Dolan, has expressed the concern that many European Commissioners do not seem to understand exactly how serious the work of inclusion is in the area of disability and many other areas, particularly given that the EU has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The social pillar must be reflected and weighted strongly within the EU semester process. In the past we saw that the Europe 2020 vision of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, which was a positive collective vision for Europe, was sublimated to short-term and immediate fiscal targets to the detriment of our national and collective development. The targets to which we sign up together, including the sustainable development goals and climate change targets, must be part of that national and international conversation in the context of the EU semester process.

In areas such as the environment and data protection we see Europe at its best, with countries pressing each other to raise standards, recognise collective goals and exercise a vision which might not be possible individually. I hope Mr. Juncker will press our Government on its failure to achieve Ireland's climate change targets, as recent reports have indicated. There is also a role for civil society and citizens working together across nations in pressing and driving those targets. However, civil society and citizens' groups have also expressed concerns about areas such as trade, to which we must listen. Given the widespread concerns about trade, which are not based on protectionism but on a different vision, and in light of European Court of Justice rulings, including the court case taking place in Luxembourg next week, is it not the case that we must change our minds from time to time? We may need to re-examine international trade and trade mandates to address the role of investor courts, which create a chilling effect in the context of the democratic driving forward of higher standards.

Others have spoken about Brexit and its importance. I wish to highlight concerns relating to human rights equivalence, particularly given the move away from the Human Rights Act in the UK. Human rights equivalence also applies in the area of reproductive rights. Many in Northern Ireland and those who stand in solidarity with them in the UK are reminding us of the Good Friday Agreement's commitment to ensuring human rights equivalence for all men and women, North and South of the Border.

I welcome Mr. Barnier back to the House and acknowledge the work he has done to try to avoid a hard border. However, one day after World Refugee Day, we must also look to the

wider question of borders in Europe and at how we are reacting on that issue. It is a matter of deep concern that Hungary has passed legislation that will see those who help refugees being penalised. There is a deep failure at a European level in the immigration control agreements that are being signed with countries such as Libya, Sudan and Turkey where there are serious human rights concerns in respect of how people are being treated. This undermines us and Europe's credibility on human rights. It also undermines our work to build peace in the world. I agree with Mr. Juncker's assertion that, at its best, Europe is building bridges and working for peace but the militarisation of our borders is not building bridges. That the text of the PESCO agreement does not contain any references to peace or peacekeeping is a real concern. Peace-building is the foundation of the European Union and it must be our future.

Mr. Juncker and others have spoken in favour of an EU army about which I am very concerned. Mr. Juncker said that a European army would send a signal to Russia and other entities but the future should not be one of big powers or allies forming alliances in the context of those big powers. The future must be one of multilateralism in its truest sense, in Europe and at the United Nations, where we recognise that diversity is strength. The diverse perspectives and skills each nation brings to the table, including the neutrality and extraordinary peacekeeping legacy of Ireland which is such an asset in Europe, are a source of strength. I urge Mr. Juncker to consider the unique capacity of all nations and how we may contribute together to a better future and play a better role in tackling global challenges.

Cathaoirleach an tSeanaid: A Uachtaráin Juncker, thar ceann an Cheann Comhairle, thar mo cheann féin agus thar ceann Chomhaltaí an dá Theach, ba mhaith liom buíochas ó chroí a ghabháil leat as bheith i láthair anseo inniu ag an gcomhshuí seo agus as plé a dhéanamh linn. President Juncker, on behalf of the Ceann Comhairle, on my own behalf, and on behalf of the Members of both Houses, I would like to thank you most sincerely for your attendance at today's joint sitting and for your engagement with us.

Today's discussion has provided a valuable opportunity for us to highlight Ireland's priorities in the current negotiations. I know I speak for all Members when I express our thanks for the support and solidarity we have received from other EU member states, from the European Parliament and, of course, from the Commission in relation to our concerns. We look forward to continued support as the negotiations progress.

While the withdrawal of the UK from the EU has clear implications for Ireland, it refocuses our attention on the conversation on the future of Europe. Today's debate has provided an important opportunity to underline again Ireland's commitment to Europe. Ireland has benefitted greatly from its membership of the EU. We continue to believe in and support the EU values of partnership and co-operation. We are committed to the vision of a united, strong and democratic Union. Again, we thank you for attending this joint sitting of the Houses of the Oireachtas. We hope you enjoy your visit. We wish you well in your work. Go raibh maith agat. Thank you.

The Joint Sitting concluded at 1.20 p.m.

The Dáil stood adjourned until 2.45 p.m.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Dara Calleary: There is a crisis across the country in child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, and the Government is asleep at the wheel as it unfolds. According to figures supplied to my colleague, Deputy James Browne, Fianna Fáil's spokesperson on mental health, 6,181 children were waiting for primary care psychology appointments at the end of January, of whom 1,635 had been waiting for over a year to see somebody. Time is of the essence in dealing with children and teenagers. There is a very narrow window for assisting them, treating their conditions and putting them on a path to recovery. That window has been made even narrower for 1,635 children who have been deprived of opportunities that should have been made available to them. As a direct consequence, unfortunately, 81 children were admitted to adult mental health units across the country in 2017. Such settings are utterly and completely unsuitable for their needs and care programmes.

There are major difficulties in attracting staff to work in CAMHS. A staff complement of 1,237 is required for a full community-based CAMHS service, but figures supplied to Deputy James Browne show that just 657 staff were in place in 2017. If current recruitment trends continue, the full complement will not be in place until 2030, which is 12 years away. The futures of children are being put at risk, while the HSE dawdles. How many more thousands of children will lose out on treatment? How many more thousands of parents will have to endure intolerable stress? This is a nationwide problem. Every Deputy has dealt with the issue in his or her constituency office. I deal with it in my constituency of Mayo. It has been highlighted in counties Wexford and Waterford in recent weeks following Dr. Kieran Moore's decision to resign from his post as a specialist paediatric consultant. As he explained to the Joint Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care:

I am resigning from Wexford because it is untenable and unsafe. Two of my colleagues are doing the same.

Such a damning indictment by a hugely respected professional should serve as a wake-up call for the Tánaiste and his Government colleagues on the reality of CAMHS. What actions are being taken by the Government to address the crisis in it? What specific recruitment plans are in place to address the shortfall in the service? What does the Tánaiste say to the 6,181 children who are languishing on the CAMHS waiting lists and to their parents?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy for observing the time limit. I ask all Deputies to do likewise, especially because we started five minutes late owing to the lack of a quorum.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Dara Calleary for raising this issue. The Minister for Health and his Government colleagues are aware that it is serious. Timely access to care is essential as part of good health provision, particularly in CAMHS. The Government has shown its commitment to achieving this by increasing funding for mental health services by over €200 million since 2012, as well as the number of staff. Additional staff are badly needed. The Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, has scheduled a round-table meeting of all CAMHS service providers in the coming weeks. While there is no doubt that recruitment in this area is difficult, it is being addressed on a continuous basis. The HSE is operating a national and international recruitment campaign for CAMHS consultant psychiatrists. The recruitment of 114 assistant psychologists and 22 psychologists for primary care child psychology services has been completed, with 111 assistant psychologists and 20 psychologists in their posts. Improvements are being made to

children's counselling services. The development of new Jigsaw sites in Cork, Dublin and Limerick will bring the total to 13 sites nationally. I am more than aware of the number of children on waiting lists to receive the treatment and diagnosis they need. There is a sense of urgency within the Government. Recruitment in this area is not easy, but there is a very active national and international recruitment campaign to try to deal with the shortfall in staff.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Tánaiste has said recruitment is not easy, but there has been a substantial number of resignations. I have referred to Dr. Kieran Moore's comment that the system is "untenable and unsafe". The current president of the College of Psychiatrists in Ireland, Dr. John Hillery, worked with the HSE until earlier this year. He has resigned from it because of his pure frustration at its inability to deal with this issue and lack of interest in doing so. He has said doctors are facing the "moral distress" of not being able to access the resources or care needed to help their patients. He has suggested doctors are finding themselves in "ethically compromising situations" on a regular basis in a system where bureaucracy has "gone mad". The Tánaiste has referred to the difficulties in recruiting consultant psychiatrists and psychologists, but there seems to be no difficulty in recruiting managers. In his evidence to the Joint Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care Dr. Moore said that even though he was a front-line professional, he did not understand the role of managers in counties Waterford and Wexford. It seems that, despite the Tánaiste's words and undoubted personal commitment, the 6,181 children to whom I have referred are facing a stark reality. The prospect of getting them off the waiting lists seems to be very remote. Is bureaucracy more important than treating children? What reassurance can the Tánaiste provide for parents in counties Waterford and Wexford who have not yet been given any information by the HSE on their children's care paths in the coming weeks and months?

The Tánaiste: The Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, met HSE officials and CAMHS HSE local representatives this week to discuss the specific actions that needed to be taken in the south east where I know there are specific pressures, as the decisions taken by consultants certainly confirm. Their frustration has led to resignations. The response from the Government needs to be the delivery of services. If we are to do this, we need to recruit more specialist staff. We certainly need to recruit from abroad. In the medium term we need to ensure we will produce more undergraduates in this area and that they will stay in Ireland.

Improvements in consultant recruitment are taking place. In urgent cases, consultants may be recruited at the ninth point of the payscale. In summation, the Government through the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, with a sense of urgency recognises there is a staffing shortfall here. It is more acute in some parts of the country than others. We are actively ensuring that a recruitment campaign delivers the numbers needed to fill those gaps. I assure the Deputy there are no funding restrictions in respect of doing that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Yesterday, David Drumm, the former chief executive of Anglo Irish Bank, was sentenced to six years for conspiracy to defraud and false accounting. It might have taken nearly ten years but the Irish people, who suffered immeasurably as a result of the actions of reckless bankers, finally have some sense of justice delivered. The damage done to the State by Anglo Irish Bank in particular was catastrophic. We should not forget that we are still paying the price of that damage because of the promissory notes and the IBRC liquidation and we will be paying for it for many decades to come. However, we cannot pretend that the conviction of David Drumm yesterday marks some sort of watershed moment. That just four people have been convicted for their roles in the banking crisis ten years after the event is hardly

a ringing endorsement of the justice system when it comes to tackling white-collar crime, which continues to go unpunished and, in many cases, is unpunishable to this day. Over the next few months, we will all reflect on the tenth anniversary of the banking crisis. I do not believe many will feel any sense of real closure when that anniversary comes and goes.

There is a mountain of work for all of us in these Houses to do to ensure this scandal never happens again and to hold those responsible to account for their actions. Urgent action is required from this Dáil and from the Government. One of the reasons for the delay in securing the prosecution of Mr. Drumm, we are told, was the scale and complexity of the case. The Garda has said it requires additional powers to investigate white-collar crime. Will the Government be taking that recommendation on board? The Central Bank has also made a number of recommendations in respect of white-collar crime, including the setting up of a dedicated division within an existing criminal agency to investigate it and for a specialised prosecution unit to be established. They have called for implementing rules in order that senior individuals in financial institutions must provide the Central Bank with a document outlining what they are in charge of. Then, if a crime takes place, that senior-level individual can be held to account for the areas for which he or she was responsible. The Central Bank has also called for making reckless lending and reckless management a crime, as is the case across the water.

White-collar crime is not victimless. Along with the Central Bank and the Garda, which is calling for additional powers and resources, Sinn Féin has also added to the suite of actions that need to be taken. For example, Deputy Ó Laoghaire and I have sponsored the Multi-Party Actions Bill 2017, which is similar in fashion to the US-style class action suits whereby a number of victims can work together to take on a corporate entity in court. We have produced legislation that would make it a crime for bankers to lie to the Central Bank and which provides that they could be imprisoned as a result of so doing. Will the Government consider these proposals from the Garda, the Central Bank and Sinn Féin in order that white-collar crime can be dealt with robustly for once and for all and so we will not have to wait another ten years to see people held to account?

The Tánaiste: I certainly hope everybody in this House shares the view that we need to be dealing robustly with white-collar crime. We need to learn lessons from a banking crisis that has caused so much difficulty for so many families and businesses across the country. The conviction of David Drumm and his sentencing yesterday were, on one level, a recognition of the seriousness of the crimes that have been committed.

From a Government perspective, our job is to make sure we learn lessons from the past and put legislative measures and policy in place to ensure they are not repeated in the future. We will listen to everybody who has a sensible contribution to make in that regard. The Government published a suite of measures last November aimed at enhancing corporate governance, increasing transparency and strengthening Ireland's response to white-collar crime. Among the actions in the package is a criminal procedure Bill which, among other things, streamlines criminal procedures to enhance the efficiency of criminal trials. The Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Bill 2017 includes provision for recommendations arising from the Mahon tribunal and will substantially advance meeting Ireland's obligations under a number of international anti-corruption instruments. This major modernisation of corruption offences law will repeal and replace the seven previous Prevention of Corruption Acts of 1889 to 2010. Work on the development of the legislative framework for the establishment of the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement as an agency has commenced and it is expected that the scheme of the Bill will give effect to this decision. It will be published in line with the delivery timelines the

Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, has outlined.

The Companies (Statutory Audits) Bill 2017 was published on 6 November 2017. The markets in financial instruments directive, MiFID II, has been implemented and, as of 3 May, the Bill is before the Dáil on Second Stage. The Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Bill was published and is progressing on schedule. The statutory review of the Protected Disclosures Act is well under way and will be published shortly. There is no shortage of legislative response coming from Government.

We will, of course, always listen to An Garda Síochána, the Central Bank and Opposition parties that have pragmatic and sensible approaches to providing a more comprehensive suite of legislation to respond to the modern challenges of white-collar crime.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is not the first time I have raised this. I have raised it with the current Taoiseach and his predecessor. We have been arguing the case that we need to bring in a suite of measures to tackle white-collar crime, particularly in the financial institutions, for many years. The previous Governor of the Central Bank wrote to the former Minister for Finance asking him to legislate to make it an offence to lie to the Central Bank. Years later, the Government still has not dealt with that issue but is blocking the Bill that passed Second Stage in this House because of a money message. After his dodgy dealings with the €7.2 billion and when that bank continued to lend, David Drumm could not be charged with reckless lending because, unlike in the North or Britain and even after what we went through, reckless lending is not a crime. The Central Bank has been calling for it to be made a crime for many years. David Drumm could not be convicted of lying to the Central Bank because it is not a crime. In Britain, there is a need for senior bankers to identify the areas for which they are responsible in order that they cannot use the excuse of plausible deniability. However, that can be used by bankers in this jurisdiction.

We heard today that more than 170 people are taking cases to the Financial Services Ombudsman against one bank, AIB, because of the tracker scandal. If they want to see justice in court, they must take their cases individually because the Government is refusing to support the class actions Bill we have brought forward, which would allow for them to club together and take on these elites in society.

Will the Tánaiste agree with the proposal to set up a dedicated unit within an existing criminal agency for investigation and prosecution to deal with white-collar crime, as has been called for by the Central Bank of Ireland?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy called for a suite of measures; that is exactly what is happening. Last year, the Minister, Deputy Flanagan, introduced a suite of measures in November and he has added to it since then. There is a whole series of legislative responses which I have spoken about. The Deputy, like everybody else, will have an opportunity to raise specific issues he would like to see addressed through that legislation and he will get a response from the Minister, Deputy Flanagan. I am not going to get into what the content of individual legislative items will be without testing that and I am not going to give the Deputy an answer on the hoof. What I will say is that the Government wants a comprehensive suite of measures to respond robustly to white-collar crime to make sure we protect consumers and do not allow the kind of banking decisions that were made in the past that virtually bankrupted this country. We are absolutely committed to that. This party wants to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated, that boom-bust cycles do not happen in the future and that we do not allow a banking system to

dominate an economy in a negative way such as happened in the past. As I said previously, if the Deputy has suggestions to make in the context of the debates that are happening - be it legislation coming from Sinn Féin or the Government - there will be more than ample opportunity to discuss the detail of those proposals in this House.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This week, the world expressed its horror, revulsion and outrage at the barbaric treatment of children by the Trump Administration at the US-Mexico border and the horrific practice of separating thousands of minors from their parents. It seems that the revulsion both in the US and across the world, including from this House, has forced President Trump to make something of a U-turn, although as thousands of children still remain in custody we will see what happens and I still will attend the protest at the US embassy this evening.

My question, and I am glad the Tánaiste is here to respond, is whether we are going to be consistent in expressing our outrage and revulsion at abuse and barbaric treatment of children because, of course, the place where this has gone on year in and year out for at least the past 20 years and which is probably the most dangerous place in the world to be a child is Gaza and the Palestinian territories, where the facts of the abuse, murder and imprisonment of children and the denial of basic rights, resources and supports by Israel in a cruel, calculated and deliberate way is simply shocking beyond belief. One Palestinian child has been killed every three days on average for the past 18 years by members of the Israeli military. In the past few weeks, 14 children have been killed and more than 1,000 injured by the Israeli military in Gaza. There are approximately 350 children in prison at present, some of whom have received sentences of up to ten years. The horror just goes on. The Save the Children organisation says that about 90% of children in Gaza are suffering psychological trauma as a result of the various Israeli offensives over the past number of years and that about 78% of children in Gaza cannot sleep at night properly because of a fear of attacks by the Israeli military and war planes.

At what point do we express outrage and revulsion at this and do something about it? Nelson Mandela's grandson recently said that Israel's apartheid was worse than that practised in South Africa and called for the boycott of Israel, as did his grandfather, Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu. What are we going to do about the barbaric treatment of children by Israel? Will we join in the call to at the very least boycott the Eurovision Song Contest in Tel Aviv next year in order that we do not give legitimacy to a regime that treats children in such a barbaric fashion using the ultimate form of separation, namely, killing and imprisoning children and denying them the most basic rights and entitlements?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I welcome the fact that the President of the United States signed an order last night to ensure there would no longer be separation of children from their parents on the border with Mexico. Approximately 2,300 children are still separated from their parents in holding centres and I hope the debate that is taking place in Congress today can deal with that issue comprehensively. I understand two items of legislation are being brought forward. I do not know whether they will be passed but certainly there is an active political debate trying to deal comprehensively with this issue following the outrage of many in the US and around the world who were dismayed by the images they saw in recent days of thousands of young children in very vulnerable and distressing circumstances.

As the Deputy knows, I have a real interest in the Middle East peace process. I have been there three times in the past year. I visited Gaza in January. I have been very vocal in this House in my criticism of the Israeli response, particularly on the Gaza border, and the tragedy

and bloodshed that has happened there in recent weeks. My focus as a politician and senior Minister in government is on trying to ensure that Ireland can be as influential as possible in trying to bring an end to that. Ultimately, the only way we can provide long-term solutions for Palestinians is to make progress on a broader political peace deal for which Ireland is actively agitating. That is what colours all the decisions I make. What can Ireland do as a country and what can we do as a Government to advance the cause of a two-state solution that can allow Palestinians to aspire to having their own state living in peace with their neighbour, Israel? This seems like a long way away right now given the tragedies we have seen in recent weeks and the tension that remains. I was in Ramallah, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Jordan and Cyprus talking about these issues only a couple of weeks ago. We will continue to do that, just as we will continue to advocate for funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA, which looks after some of the most vulnerable people in Gaza and the West Bank and indeed Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.

I do not believe that we are advancing the cause of Palestinians by calling for or supporting a boycott right now. That would polarise things even further. I am not sure we can legally do that anyway because trade policy is the competence of the EU as a collective. I need to remain an influential and vocal advocate for positive change in Israel and Palestine within the EU and among the countries that have influence on getting results in that regard. That is why I follow the course of action I have been following.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Politics, two-state solutions, one-state solutions, engagement - blah, blah, blah - we are talking about children. These are innocent children who are in prison; who are being killed, maimed or shot, who do not have proper schools and who cannot sleep because of fear of Israeli assaults. This goes beyond any of that other stuff. The world set aside politics when it came to the treatment of children in the past few weeks in the US and said we are not accepting this. The same has to happen with Israel. We have had 22 years of engagement with Israel since the Oslo Accords and its treatment of children and denial of rights has got worse, not better. Engagement has not worked.

I have a simple question for the Tánaiste. Was the world right to boycott apartheid-era South Africa? Is there a time when it is right to boycott an apartheid state? If it was right and if Nelson Mandela, the world, the Dunnes Stores strikers and this country were right to do it in the case of South Africa, how is it not right to do it to a state that is behaving in a worse fashion than apartheid-era South Africa? As even Nelson Mandela's grandson says that Israeli apartheid is worse than that practised in South Africa, should we not heed his call, as someone who knows, to at least boycott the Eurovision Song Contest?

The Tánaiste: Sometimes when I hear the Deputy speak, he seems to suggest that he is coming from a higher moral ground than the Government on these issues. He is not. We care about this issue. That is why I am engaging as much as I am on it. I have probably spent more time on the Middle East peace process than on anything else other than Brexit and our relationships in Europe and Washington. That is because we are trying to ensure that Ireland can maximise its leverage and influence in terms of the politics of this issue, which, ultimately, will be the issue that will protect children, many of whom I have met in schools and health centres in places like Gaza and the West Bank. We do not actually disagree on the outcome we want. What we disagree on is the method of getting us there. I do not believe boycotts and protests alone will solve this issue.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It worked in South Africa.

The Tánaiste: It worked in South Africa but this is a very different case, if one looks at the politics of the Middle East right now. We are using the information, the judgment and the advice we have, as a Government, to prioritise this issue and to try to bring about political solutions. I do not believe advocating for a boycott will help in that effort.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Mar is eol don Tánaiste is cathair álainn dhátheangach í cathair na Gaillimhe atá ar thairseach na Gaeltachta is mó sa tír. Tá stádas mar Phríomhchathair Chultúir na hEorpa bainte amach aici. Tá réimse leathan ócáidí leagtha amach don bhliain sin agus tá an t-uafás airgid poiblí geallta nó, ar ndóigh, caite chun an stádas sin a chur chun críche. It has, of course, two third level institutions embedded within the life of the city and a world class tech cluster. I mention only some of the positive advantages, many of which are outlined in the national planning framework, which I will come to shortly.

Notwithstanding that it is a vibrant, beautiful and bilingual city, one I am very proud of and want to see develop, it faces the most acute challenges in regard to the housing crisis, affordable and public housing and the lack of student accommodation, together with serious traffic congestion, as a direct result of the failure to build housing and the lack of planning. I draw this matter to the attention of the Tánaiste. I am glad he is here because I also drew this to his attention on 17 January of this year when I pointed out that Galway not alone faces these challenges but there is no master plan. The Tánaiste surprised me on that occasion by telling me that while he often disagrees with me, he agreed with virtually everything I said and he did not believe in leaving things to the vagaries of the market. Since then, the national planning framework has been published and, notwithstanding any problems around its publicity, it uses the terms “sustainable development” and “regional development”, and refers to the development of five cities in particular, including Galway.

To focus on sustainable development, there is no reason Galway should have the problems it has and which have become chronic. We have any amount of public land at the docks, at Ceannt Station, on the Dyke Road and at the airport, but we have no master plan. The framework development plan the Government has published states that the five cities, including Galway, will grow by 50% and that most of that development will have to be within the footprint of the city. Almost six months after I first asked him, I ask the Tánaiste again to please take a hands-on approach in regard to Galway. We need a master plan for the common good, not for the developer. As we speak, parts of the docks and parts of Ceannt Station are being developed and other land is sitting idle, while we have a serious housing crisis.

In addition to housing, practically every day in this Chamber we hear about climate change, on which Ireland was ranked second last in Europe in the latest report. We hear the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport talk about taking cars off the road. It is time to look at light rail for Galway. Some 22,000 people signed a petition that I was in charge of in Galway over an eight-week period. They are way ahead of us with regard to sustainable solutions and in their realisation that we have to do something to reduce carbon emissions.

To conclude, my question is whether we will have a master plan and, included within that, at least a study in regard to light rail.

The Tánaiste: I do not disagree with the Deputy on those calls, although we sometimes disagree on policy. I know she has raised social housing concerns in Galway over and over again, understandably so, given there are huge pressures in that regard in Galway city. There

are currently ten local authority construction schemes in the pipeline which will deliver 365 units when completed - I can name them if the Deputy wants. However, that is not really what she is asking today, to be fair. She is asking where is the overarching plan for what the city will look like in ten and 20 years' time.

I have taken a strong interest in my own city in terms of what it will look like then. We are talking about light rail. We have a very clear picture of where new housing will be built and where the higher density, higher buildings will be built. We are trying to build a collective vision across parties for how Cork city, for example, will facilitate an extra 120,000 people in the next two decades, and not simply by extending boundaries. Project Ireland 2040 is very clear in terms of its plan for existing cities outside of Dublin. We want a 50% population growth target and, while we do not want the cities to be limited by that, it is the target. We want plans from local authorities that can deliver this in a sustainable way and that can focus on quality of life issues and work-life balance. We want to ensure that climate change and emissions management are a big part of that in terms of public transport delivery, which is why we are committing to spend hundreds of millions of euro on much smarter BusConnects systems and also light rail, where appropriate.

The onus is on local decision making. The people who understand Galway best have to come forward with the detailed plans. What will happen now is that there will be regional plans to set the guidelines for planning the projects contained in Project Ireland 2040. However, the actual detail of that within individual cities has to come from those cities and the local governance structures within them.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I appreciate the Tánaiste's positive comments. However, Galway's population is destined to grow from 80,000 to 120,000. With regard to development within the footprint of the city, the Tánaiste would have to accept that allowing that to happen without a master plan for the common good is simply madness.

I appreciate the Government's commitments on climate change and the reduction of carbon emissions, although it is not meeting them. However, in Galway we are planning another road with more cars that the city cannot cope with in the foreseeable future. We need to look at an alternative model. Light rail would fit in to the idea of intensive development within the city but that will not happen without a push from the Government. I was there when we looked at an outer bypass that went nowhere but down a cul-de-sac. That was difficult enough to watch but, at the same time, there was no commitment to sustainable transport. In 2005 we put park and ride in the city development plan, and I had the privilege of being mayor when that happened. We fought tooth and nail to put it in against management, who thought it was premature. As a result of their view that it was premature, we still do not have park and ride in 2018 and there is serious traffic congestion.

More roads is not the answer. We need a master plan and to consider light rail. I do not believe Cork asked for light rail yet it will be considered, whereas Galway has been begging for it through its people. More than 22,000 people from a population of just under 80,000 have asked for light rail.

The Tánaiste: I believe Galway does need some new roads. There is a ring road system around Galway city that needs to be completed to provide the kind of free-flowing traffic movements that are necessary. Traffic congestion in Galway city is a significant issue and a significant problem in terms of future growth and investment. That being said, I believe we will see a

much bigger emphasis in urban environments on public transport provision and higher density, but also higher quality of residential property. That is what needs to happen.

Of course, this needs to happen under an overall city development plan. The Deputy can call it a master plan or a county and city development plan - whatever she wants to call it. Ultimately, however, the whole point of having a national planning framework is that planning in the future is not development-led but is plan-led in terms of trying to socially engineer, if one likes, how and where people live in the interests of the environment and quality of life. The idea that we have tens of thousands of people travelling into Dublin from more than an hour away every morning and making the same journey back in the evening is an example of the kind of planning we do not want to see in the future. Galway has an opportunity to give leadership on that, as do the other cities. I hope they will take that opportunity.

Questions on Promised Legislation

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not have to remind Deputies that it is Thursday and there are 15 minutes available in the next slot, which is for questions and answers, not statements. Elaboration is unnecessary and should be avoided to give every other Member a chance to come in. Apart from the leaders, Deputies Breathnach, O'Loughlin, Lahart, Martin Kenny, Michael Collins, McLoughlin, Crowe and Scanlon have indicated and I ask speakers to take their colleagues into consideration. I will be cutting this off after 15 minutes. I call Deputy Calleary.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There has been a serious disruption this morning in the debit card services of one of our leading banks. The Government has done a great deal of work to encourage people to use debit cards in recent years but this is not the first service disruption by a bank. Does the Government plan to introduce financial sanctions for banks for service disruptions which cause huge inconvenience and stress to users?

The Tánaiste: I do not have information on new legislation in that area but I will certainly ask the Minister to get back to the Deputy with some detail.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I raise the issue of services for children with autism in particular and the matter of autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit places in schools and the supports therein. There are long waiting lists and people are obliged to travel long distances to access units. In some cases, there are simply no available places for children while other schools are hesitant about opening ASD units at all because they will not receive adequate funding and support to run them. To say parents are at their wits' end is an understatement. It is deeply distressing for children with ASD and their parents not to know where they are going in September, whether there will be places for them and whether supports will be in available in that environment. The Government is failing children with ASD. There are many other issues which parents and children face in terms of assessment and so on, but I ask the Government not to wait for September and to make the necessary investment to provide for school places now. The Government must ensure that every child with ASD has an appropriate place in the education system come September. The supports necessary to nurture their potential should be there.

The Tánaiste: There has been a very dramatic increase in spending in this area. In fact, we have changed the regulations to allow the Minister to instruct a school to put an ASD unit in place. That was not previously the case. I am very familiar with the stresses parents face, as I

suspect are many others, where they are trying and failing to get the supports they need in terms of ASD units in schools. As such, we will continue to invest heavily in this area.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I have raised countless times in the Chamber the issue of lack of access to medical cannabis. Yesterday, I was in the House of Commons with Vera Twomey where we attended a presentation on access to medical cannabis in Britain. I will get onto that in a few minutes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy does not have a few minutes.

Deputy Gino Kenny: In the time that I have. Ms Twomey spoke passionately about the ordeal her family went through. I spoke to MPs about the lack of progress and, in particular, about the Government stalling the legislation. I do not know if the Tánaiste has been watching, but the Tory Government in the UK has done a U-turn on access to medicinal cannabis and is carrying out a full review. The Minister for Health briefed the Cabinet two or three weeks ago about the lack of access to medical cannabis.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should ask a question. We have a long list.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I want the Tánaiste to give me an answer on the lack of access to medical cannabis while people are suffering. I know for a fact that people will die because of the Government's lack of progress on this issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please. You have made your point. Your colleagues want to come in.

Deputy Gino Kenny: They are going to die.

The Tánaiste: Parents and children can access medicinal cannabis in Ireland today. Vera Twomey's case is very familiar to me and I know her very well. I have intervened in that case to try to help her, as have others in the House. That access has been very beneficial for her child. As far as I am aware, the Minister for Health has not refused to licence the importation of medicinal cannabis in any case where that course has been recommended by a consultant. Parents can access medicinal cannabis today, which is different from what the Deputy is looking for, namely, to not require any process of licensing from the Minister.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Can the Tánaiste withdraw that remark? That is not true.

The Tánaiste: What is not true?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Kenny cannot come in. I am going to move on.

Deputy Gino Kenny: He said piece of legislation. The Government has sat on that Bill for the last eight months.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to put down a Topical Issue or find some other way to raise the matter if he needs more than a minute.

Deputy Gino Kenny: It is a lie. The Tánaiste has misled the House.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: That is not a lie. The Deputy is not allowed to do that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I did not hear him, but if the Deputy used the word "lie"-----

Deputy John Lahart: He did.

The Tánaiste: Can I clarify?

Deputy Gino Kenny: He misled the House.

The Tánaiste: I have not misled the House. I said that parents and children can currently access medicinal cannabis but they must have a licence from the Minister for Health who, as far as I am aware, has not refused a single case as long as there has been a consultant doctor's recommendation.

Deputy Gino Kenny: It should not be up to the Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Kenny's colleagues want to ask questions.

Deputy Gino Kenny: If the Tánaiste starts to give straight answers, I will stop.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy had an opportunity. I was too lenient with him. Other Members want to ask questions and I have asked for the co-operation of the House in that regard but I am not getting it.

The Tánaiste: What I said was that Deputy Kenny was looking for something different, which he should see as a compliment. He is looking for a Bill to deal with this in a more comprehensive way but the legislation he presented is not fit for purpose. This is an issue that the Minister, Deputy Harris, has under review and the Government will deal with it in a way that is in the interests of children.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I will be short.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is it a question?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Yes. I have a constituent, Ms Anna Dunne of Churchtown, Carrick-On-Suir, County Waterford, whose son, Nicholas, who is 20 years old, needs a residential place because he is severely autistic. The safety of Ms Dunne and her family is at risk. We have met the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, but got nowhere. While Ms Dunne's son has been assessed by two different institutions and approved for a residential place, the HSE will not provide the necessary funding. There are many cases like this around the country but this one is profoundly difficult and very challenging for the family who have done great work to keep him at home up to this age. I ask the Tánaiste to talk to the Minister of State because he must make funding available before someone dies.

The Tánaiste: I will ask the Minister of State or his office to come back to the Deputy. I cannot comment on an individual case.

Deputy Declan Breathnach: On page 96 of the programme for Government, under crime prevention and justice and equality, there is a commitment to protect all of our citizens and to reduce the incidence of crime. The most recent brutal killing of Cameron Reilly by way of strangulation and kicking to death has left the community of Dunleer in my constituency in shock as did the earlier murder in Dundalk of Yosuke Sasaki from Japan. When those murders were carried out, there were two people walking the streets of Dundalk who had previously been charged with murder and released on bail. Coupled with the murders of Detective Garda Adrian Donohoe and Garda Tony Golden in my own constituency, does the Tánaiste accept

there is a major need to overhaul our bail laws? The perpetration of crime by persons on bail and sentencing issues must be addressed. I am not speaking on behalf of people in my constituency alone. People across the country want the Dáil to deal with this issue. The punishment or deterrent does not match the crime.

The Tánaiste: There was a criminal justice Act dealing with bail law last year. I will certainly ask the Minister for Justice and Equality to get back to the Deputy on the question he asks.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I refer to page 82 of the programme for Government, which contains a commitment to work to make our older years better years and to provide home care packages. Page 63 of the programme for Government refers to access to end-of-life healthcare. Just this week, I have been dealing with two constituents who have been given blank refusals despite commitments that were made. One particular lady is 90 years of age. She worked her whole life and raised a family. She is at the end of her life in a hospital, which will not release her until supports are in place at home. Understandably, her family want to bring her home as opposed to a nursing home. Last week, a commitment was made that funding would be provided after two weeks and the family put emergency care in place. Thankfully, that lady is coming home today.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: This morning the family received a call to say there is no funding available. They cannot afford to put supports in place but they are happy to bring their mother home. This is putting them in financial penury. Something must be done to deal with this issue. When will deserving people receive the care they need?

The Tánaiste: It is hard for me to comment on the reasons for difficulties in an individual case.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I accept that but this is not the only one.

The Tánaiste: If Deputy O'Loughlin provides me with the details, I will convey them to the Minister.

Deputy John Lahart: My question relates to having a directly elected mayor of Dublin. More than a year ago, the Tánaiste, who was the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government at the time, asked Deputy Eamon Ryan and me to pause our legislation on this matter on the basis that there would be movement on it in September of that year. I welcome the Taoiseach's commitment to a plebiscite, which will run in tandem with the local and European elections next May. As the Tánaiste will be aware, Fianna Fáil was the only party to propose the idea of a plebiscite, although other parties support the idea of a directly elected mayor. Will the Tánaiste confirm the plebiscite will be of the people of Dublin only, as opposed to the Dublin region as a whole? Will he also confirm that the plebiscite will deal with the election of one mayor and not four mayors? Will he confirm that a position paper will be published well in advance of the plebiscite to give the people of Dublin ample opportunity for a proper, informed discussion and conversation on the matter?

The Tánaiste: Both the Taoiseach and I are absolutely committed to moving ahead with directly elected mayors. However, we will first ask people whether they want directed elected mayors. I would also like to see a directly elected mayor in Cork and other cities. That would

be an advancement of local democracy and would give people real ownership of their first citizen, who they would elect directly.

It is unlikely that we will have four directly elected mayors in Dublin. Dublin is a much more complex local governance structure to manage in the context of electing one directly elected mayor across multiple local authorities and the interaction between the cathaoirligh of the various local authorities and a directly elected mayor. We are moving ahead with this proposal, albeit with caution. I note Deputy Lahart has been involved in those conversations.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I raise the issue of ambulance cover in rural areas, particularly in County Leitrim. I have raised this issue on several occasions previously. In emergency cases, it always takes more than an hour before an ambulance reaches the person who is in need. This week, a local general practitioner in Ballinamore, Dr. Bourke, pointed out this problem had affected two of his patients in the past couple of months. In one case, the ambulance arrived five hours after he made the telephone call. Only last week, he phoned an ambulance to come to the house of an elderly lady aged in her 90s and it was six hours before she arrived in hospital. This is disgraceful. Resources must be provided for additional ambulances and staff to ensure that those living in rural areas receive the service they deserve.

The Tánaiste: Clearly, it should not take five or six hours for an ambulance to reach a patient in any part of the country.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: It has happened.

The Tánaiste: It is not acceptable. If Deputy Martin Kenny sends me details of individual cases, I will try and obtain answers on what went wrong and, more important, on what plans are in place to improve the service in future.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: Leitrim Comhairle na nÓg this year worked on an initiative that has gained media attention. Launched in the Bush Hotel, Carrick-on-Shannon, on Friday, 27 April, the campaign is called Use your Brain, Not your Fists. It targets those responsible for random alcohol-related assaults, the majority of which, according to the statistics, are perpetrated between the hours of 8 p.m. and 5 a.m. by persons who are not known to the Garda and are not repeat offenders. The Comhairle na nÓg Leitrim steering committee believes the initiative should be included in the social, personal and health education, SPHE course in all secondary schools. Comhairle members produced a short film with the title, "Use your Brain, Not your Fists", for circulation to the media, schools and youth groups. The video features Ms Rosie Dolan and Mr. Joe Grogan, the parents of two young men who were assaulted in unprovoked attacks. Joe and Rosie Dolan are the parents of the late Andrew Dolan who was killed when he was struck and fell in an unprovoked attack. Shane Grogan is severely disabled as a result of an unprovoked attack.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does Deputy Scanlon have a question?

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: Leitrim Comhairle na nÓg has written to the Ministers for Justice and Equality, Children and Youth Affairs and Education and Skills seeking to have Use your Brain, Not your Fists included in the SPHE course.

The Tánaiste Simon Coveney: It sounds like a good campaign. Comhairle na nÓg does a great deal of good work for young people. I suggest the Deputy drop a line to the Ministers concerned and try to get a direct answer from them. He can then revert to me if it would be helpful.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: That has been done already.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I refer to a report given to me only last week on the possible closure of a fire station in Ballyshannon, County Donegal. Funding was only recently announced under the Project Ireland 2040 plan for new developments, including fire stations. A recommendation that the fire station be closed was made and the Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach, Deputy McHugh, and I have been lobbying to ensure no decision to proceed with the closure is made. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will be aware, Donegal County Council will hold a special meeting on Monday next to discuss the disturbing recommendation made to the council by certain individuals that the fire station in Ballyshannon be closed. Those who work in the first station and people living in the town are concerned. All Deputies will support my position that a decision on this matter should not be made until Donegal County Council has an opportunity to discuss the matter, at which point the Minister may intervene.

The Tánaiste: If I may intervene at this point, I acknowledge the strong representations made by Deputy McLoughlin. I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy McHugh, has also raised concerns in this regard. It is now a matter for the line Minister.

Deputy Michael Collins: In the programme for Government, under crime and prevention, the Government promised to reopen some Garda stations which had been closed by the previous Government. On 19 December 2017, the Government announced the reopening of six Garda stations, including Ballinspittle Garda station in my constituency. When will Ballinspittle Garda station in west Cork be open to the public? People are calling for it to open.

The Tánaiste: My understanding is that good progress is being made on all six Garda stations, including Stepside Garda station, as the Minister, Deputy Madigan, has reminded me. There has been much commentary on the reopening of Stepside Garda station. My understanding is that the plan is to move ahead quickly with the reopening of these Garda stations. I can get the details on Ballinspittle Garda station if that is helpful.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I refer to waiting lists and access to a dermatologist in Tallaght Hospital, for which one of my constituents has been waiting for 12 months. When I put a question on this case to the Minister for Health, he indicated there were 2,868 people on the waiting list and that 43% of these had been waiting for eight months or less. This means 57% have been waiting for longer than eight months. Of these, 691 have been waiting for 18 months or longer. There is clearly something wrong. It is cruel, inhuman and dangerous to have people wait so long to access a dermatology service, especially as some of them have serious conditions. Is there anything the Government can do?

The Tánaiste: The Government is doing a range of things to address waiting lists, from funding operations outside of the State to recruitment campaigns. I suggest the Deputy table a specific question to the Minister for Health on the issues at Tallaght Hospital and the need to recruit a dermatologist.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I will ask a question I have been asking since January 2013. I refer to legislation the Government considered urgent at the time. When will the Bill to establish the national paediatric hospital development board be published? According to information I have received, the delay in publishing and passing the Bill is causing major problems with planning for the recruitment of staff to commission the new hospital to be located on the grounds of St. James's Hospital and its two satellite facilities in Tallaght and Blanchardstown.

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If the legislation is not published and enacted before January next, there will be problems. The last time I asked this question, the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, stated the Bill was imminent. I am still waiting on this legislation which, as I said, I first asked about in January 2013.

The Tánaiste: Perhaps the legislation for which Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh is looking is the children's health Bill, which is due to be published before the House rises for the summer.

Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): 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 Mary Butler - to discuss staffing for children's mental health services; (2) Deputy Joan Burton - to discuss proposals to address climate change here; (3) Deputies Sean Fleming and Brian Stanley - to discuss shortfalls in the primary schools capitation grant; (4) Deputy James Browne - the need for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to address the delays in approving the pathfinder programme for young people with mental health problems; (5) Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin - the cross-border directive uptake and related advertising by the HSE; (6) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the papal visit and any impact it may have on homeless accommodation; (7) Deputies Frank O'Rourke and John Brassil - to discuss issues related to the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme in Kildare North and County Kerry; and (8) Deputies Robert Troy and John Lahart - the need for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to outline what policy changes he intends to introduce to combat anti-social behaviour on public transport in the light of recent reports which shows an unacceptable number of incidences.

The matters raised by Deputies Sean Fleming and Brian Stanley, Joan Burton, Fiona O'Loughlin and Dessie Ellis have been selected for discussion.

Urban Regeneration and Housing (Amendment) Bill 2018: First Stage

Deputy Mick Wallace: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend Part 2 of the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, which concerns the Vacant Site Levy; to increase the vacant site levy and make changes to some of the provisions of the levy; to allow owners of sites deemed vacant, the opportunity to enter into negotiations with the relevant Local Authority, or State Agency, to sell the site for a percentage of its value; and to provide for related matters.

I apologise for interrupting the Tánaiste's conversation. I know that he is interested in the issue of housing, given that he was in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government for a while.

I am conscious of the fact that it is not easy to run a country. We know from daily business in the House that there are many problems with how we do things, one of which is in how we supply housing. It is a big problem, whether it concerns homelessness, high rents, the supply of housing or affordability. In 2015 we had the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, part of which involved a vacant site levy. I argued at the time - it has since been borne out, whether

people like to admit it - that the levy had been designed to fail and not to prevent or discourage landbanking. It has not done so. I know that it has not even been collected, but it has not affected the price of land being banked.

The Kenny report dates back to 1974. The truth of the matter is that no Government in the history of the State has had the courage to do what needs to be done to tackle landbanking. The vacant site levy brought forward was 3%. It has been increased to 7%, but there are so many holes in the scheme that it will not catch someone who is landbanking. I assure the Tánaiste that if I had 500 acres of land zoned for development and was landbanking it, I would not have to pay any tax while doing so because there are so many loopholes in the Act. I hope to receive the support of the Government and the Opposition for the Bill because I firmly believe it is in the interests of over 99% of the people of Ireland that we do something positive about the matter. I am conscious of section 43 and the challenges posed by it, but it is an initiative we need to have commenced at some stage.

The Bill seeks to amend Part 2 of the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015. It aims to increase the vacant site levy, make changes to some of the provisions related to it and allow owners of sites deemed to be vacant the opportunity to enter into negotiations with the relevant local authority or State agency to sell them for a percentage of their value. If enacted, the legislation will go a long way towards addressing the overall problem landbanking is creating in the State where housing is, generally, double the price of what it is in most countries in western Europe.

There are 13 sections contained in the Bill. I will briefly go through five of its main components. We will be introducing the Bill on 3 July.

Section 4 will tighten the conditions on what constitutes a vacant or idle site. A site will be deemed to be vacant if planning permission for a development has exceeded 12 months and no commencement notice for development has been issued, or where a commencement notice for a development has been issued and 36 months have elapsed without completion of the site. A site where an unauthorised use or development is occurring or a site which is being utilised on an authorised, temporary basis for an activity other than development will all be deemed to be vacant.

Section 11 will increase the vacant site levy from 3% to 25%. All exemptions for site owners will also be removed, regardless of whether there is a loan on the site. Under the 2015 legislation, if there was a mortgage on a site, the levy was reduced to either 1.5%, 0.75% or 0%, which made a nonsense of the Act. These exemptions will be removed. We will remove three of the four appeals allowed under the 2015 Act. A site owner will now only be allowed to make one appeal. The four appeals made a joke of the Act. The process could be dragged out for six or seven years because so many appeals were allowed.

Section 16(a) introduces an option for the owner of a site deemed to be vacant, prior to paying the 25% levy, to enter into negotiations with the relevant local authority or State agency to sell the site for up to 60% of its value if the relevant local authority or State agency deem the site to be viable for the supply of housing at the time.

I sincerely hope the Government will take a serious look at the Bill and support it.

The Tánaiste: We will take a look at it.

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Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Is the Bill opposed?

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): No.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Irish Coast Guard Authority Bill 2018: First Stage

Deputy Robert Troy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to make provision for the establishment of a body to be known as the Irish Coast Guard Authority, replacing that division of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport known as the Irish Coast Guard, to designate said body as a principal response agency to engage in the management and co-ordination of responses to major emergency events within the State and which shall serve in co-operation with An Garda Síochána, the Health Service Executive, local authorities and other relevant bodies as may be prescribed by the Minister and to provide for related matters.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce on behalf of Fianna Fáil the Irish Coast Guard Authority Bill 2018, the purpose of which is to place the Irish Coast Guard on a statutory basis. As we are all aware, the Irish Coast Guard is one of Ireland's most important and respected organisations. Day in and day out, its members place their lives on the line to steward coastal communities and all those on the seas to safety. The sheer risk and danger involved in this role were highlighted by the tragic deaths of four members of the Irish Coast Guard off the coast of County Mayo in March 2017. May their souls rest in peace.

As a body, the Irish Coast Guard was established in 1990 to handle search and rescue operations in a marine setting, enforce Ireland's marine pollution regime and provide a response to marine casualty incidents. The Irish Coast Guard is one of Ireland's four principal emergency services, the other three being the fire service, the National Ambulance Service and An Garda Síochána. It is essentially the emergency service that operates within the marine space. We can all agree that having an effective marine safety service is of immense importance, especially given Ireland's coastal nature and the extensive marine activities that take place here. However, many people will be shocked to learn that, unlike its other emergency service counterparts, the Irish Coast Guard does not operate on a statutory basis. There is a certain sense in the Irish Coast Guard community - I say this without rancour or blame - that their position is uncertain. Understandably, given the amount of work done by them and the dedication they bring to the table, Irish Coast Guard volunteers and staff would like to feel their status is equal to that of the other emergency services and that their organisation could not be disregarded at a moment's notice. For this reason, Fianna Fáil is bringing forward the Bill which will create a statutory Irish Coast Guard Authority. It will not alter the functions of the Irish Coast Guard, but it does acknowledge the stellar work it already does and will ensure it will continue to be able to do it.

I hope the Bill will have the support of the Minister who does not live too far from the coast, as well that of my colleagues in all parties and none.

Deputy James Browne: Last year the Irish Coast Guard assisted more than 3,300 people and saved 335 lives.

From people overboard to ships sinking 30 km off the coast and everything in between, it protects our fishing communities and our coastlines. More than 40 units of the Coast Guard protect 7,500 km of our coastline. In my home county, Wexford, there are Ross-lare, Carnsore, Curracloe, Fethard-on-Sea and Kilmore Quay Coast Guard stations, some of them in a deplorable state. Members of the Coast Guard do their difficult job often in the harshest of weather conditions including huge waves, driving rain, hail, sleet, snow and high winds. Every time they go out, they put their lives at risk and we know from the tragedies suffered that is a very real risk. The loss of Rescue 116 and the lives of Captain Dara Fitzpatrick, Captain Mark Duffy and crew members Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith off the coast of Mayo and separately the loss of volunteer Caitríona Lucas in recent years is testimony to that. It is phenomenal to think they do all this on a voluntary basis.

There are four blue light services in Ireland: An Garda Síochána, the National Ambulance Service, the fire service and the Coast Guard but the Coast Guard stands out as the only one of the four not protected by statutory legislation. As a consequence, it struggles for representation, recognition and protection. This legislation seeks to correct this by putting the Coast Guard on an equal footing with the other blue light services. I was very happy to work with Deputy Troy in advance of this Bill being prepared and Deputy Troy deserves great credit for his work in this area. This Bill is fair and reasonable, is the just thing to do and is the least the Coast Guard deserves.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Joe McHugh): No.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Film Industry Tax Reliefs

1. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the engagement she has had with the Department of Finance on the extension of section 481 film relief; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27284/18]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Deputy Ó Cuív is to introduce this question.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Unless it is renewed, section 481 expires in 2020. Uncertainty in the film industry will lead to loss of business. It can take five years of planning before a production comes on stream as they need to plan considerably ahead. What discussions have taken place between the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Finance to ensure the renewal of this very important support for our film industry?

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): As a tax relief, section 481 is a matter in the first instance for my colleague, the Minister for Finance. It is a film tax credit, which provides a critical support for the Irish production sector, generating thousands of jobs and providing a strong value proposition for the public purse. As the Deputy noted, the existing tax credit extends to 31 December 2020.

The Department of Finance is now undertaking a full review of section 481 in line with tax expenditure guidelines in advance of any formal decision to extend the extension of tax credit. My Department is working closely with the Department of Finance on an ongoing basis on the issue, including the provision of information for input into the review.

Pillar 4 of the Creative Ireland programme focuses on Ireland's potential to be a global leader in film production, TV drama, documentary, children's storytelling and animation. Central to this pillar is the production of an audiovisual action plan, which I will publish very shortly, on 27 June, and which will aim to put in place a strategic and coherent approach to making Ireland a leader in this sector. The audiovisual action plan is being informed by a number of key inputs including a report by economic consultants Olsberg with Nordicity entitled, An Economic Analysis of the Irish Audiovisual Sector, which includes policy recommendations; the outcomes of a media production workshop at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, hosted by my Department last year under my predecessor, which was attended by more than 150 representatives of the film, broadcast and animation sectors; and a report on a strategy for the development of skills for the audiovisual industry in Ireland, which was commissioned jointly by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and the Irish Film Board, prepared by consultants Crowe Horwath. The plan will also be underpinned by the Government's capital investment plan.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: With certain justification, the now President of Ireland but then Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins, was credited with being the powerhouse behind the introduction of what is now section 481. It was a different section at

that time. Whereas technically I appreciate that it is the responsibility of the Minister for Finance and that is why the question is framed as it is, the driving force behind this has to be the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and it has to be driven home to the financial conservatives that this is of huge importance. Can the Minister tell me when publication will take place of the economic analysis of our screen-based creative industries? That would be a very important tool in the armoury the Minister will need to persuade the Minister to renew this in the next budget and to renew it for ten years. Can the Minister further confirm that she is seeking that it be renewed for ten years to create certainty in the industry?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The Olsberg report will be published on 27 June, together with my audiovisual plan, which I mentioned in my response. Changes to the tax code are always budget announcements. However, the necessary work to enable announcement in this year's budget is under way. It is a tax expenditure and is therefore subject to the requirements of the Department of Finance tax expenditure guidelines. As a requirement under the guidelines, reliefs such as section 481 are required to be reviewed periodically. This review is under way and the Olsberg report will feed into this review. We are also very aware of the importance of the tax credit system in supporting the industry in Ireland and the need to be competitive with other jurisdictions, which have support for the industry.

The origins of section 481 lay in the business expansion scheme in 1984, which allowed individuals to claim tax relief on investments in film production and other designated enterprise sectors.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does the Minister agree this should have been renewed last year or the year before because of the five-year minimum lead-in for the big productions? There are many series made by Netflix and Amazon Prime and so on. We are in a very new world of a screen, where all the different technologies are merging and it is not just film in the old-fashioned sense. The lead-in is quite extraordinary. Can the Minister absolutely confirm to the House that a decision will be announced in the budget because the industry needs that certainty to get out in the market and to be able to say we will have this relief? Can the Minister also confirm that it will be for ten years because anything less would be useless?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I do not intend to predict the outcome of the review but the Deputy may have noted that I changed the name of the Irish Film Board to Fís Éireann, which encompasses much of the revolution in the media and is forward thinking. The Department is aware of the need to ensure early certainty on the continuation of the tax credit support. While the present extension is only half way through its lifespan, many of the investments being considered in the sector are unlikely to come on line until after the State makes a decision. Major studios work years ahead to plan their productions with films for 2019 being prepared in detail and outline plans for 2020 being made. This incentive also applies to feature film, TV drama, animation and creative documentary. Galway has a very strong reputation in the film industry, for example, Telegael and the impact of TG4 has been very strongly felt in Connemara.

Plean Forbartha Náisiúnta

2. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** den an Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta cén fáth nach bhfuil a Roinn ag caitheamh ach 15% dá caiteachas caipitil ar an nGaeltacht agus na hOileán sa Phlean Forbartha Náisiúnta i comparáid leis an bplean náisiúnta a bhí ann roimhe seo, Transforming Ireland ina raibh 22% den chaiteachas caipitil geallta don Ghaeltacht.

[27054/18]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is oth liom a rá go bhfuil an Teachta Tóibín ag baint inniu. Cuirfidh mé sin in iúl roimh ré. Cén leithscéal nó cosaint atá ag an Aire Stáit i leith na firice go raibh 22% de chaiteachas caipitil idir 2007 agus 2013 geallta don Ghaeltacht agus do na hoileáin ach nach bhfuil i gceist faoi Project Ireland 2040 ach 15% den bhuiséad caipitil? Déanfaidh an difir seo damáiste do tharrtháil tograí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Joe McHugh): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta faoi choinne na ceiste. Tá muid ag pointe difriúil anois i saol eacnamaíochta na tíre seo ná mar a bhíomar nuair a foilsíodh Athrú Mór ar Éirinn, nó Transforming Ireland, in 2007, plan nár cuireadh i bhfeidhm go hiomlán de bharr na géarchéime eacnamaíochta. Faoi Thionscadal Éireann 2040, déanfar cúram d'fhás inmharthanach agus rath na hÉireann agus cuirfear béim faoi leith ar an uathúlacht a bhaineann le cultúr saibhir na hÉireann agus a thábhachtaí atá sé é a chaomhnú agus a chothú. Ar ndóigh, tá an Ghaeilge mar chuid lárnach den chultúr sin agus tá tábhacht faoi leith ag an nGaeltacht mar fhearann dúchais na Gaeilge. Beifear ag féachaint chuige, mar sin, go dtapaítear gach deis chun go n-aithnítear é sin mar is cuí.

I mí Aibreáin na bliana seo, foilsíodh “Infheistíocht inár gCultúr, inár dTeanga agus inár nOidhreacht 2018-2027”, plan na Roinne Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta faoi Thionscadal Éireann 2040. Tá beartaithe sa phlean seo go ndéanfaidh an Rialtas infheistíocht chaipitil de €178 milliún sa Ghaeilge, sa Ghaeltacht agus sna hoileáin as seo go ceann deich mbliana. Clúdaíonn sé seo: infheistíocht de €105 milliún ag Údarás na Gaeltachta i gcruthú fostaíochta; infheistíocht de €33 milliún mar bhuntaca don phróiseas planála teanga; infheistíocht de €13 milliún i líonraí Gaeilge agus i mbailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta; agus infheistíocht de €27 milliún in infreastruchtúr na n-oileán.

Is plan meáite é Tionscadal Éireann 2040 agus an tír seo ag teacht chuici féin tar éis blianta de chiorruithe. Is méadú de thart ar 78% é an €178 milliún atá luaite leis an bplan ar an allúntas a bheifí ag súil leis thar thréimhse deich mbliana dá mbainfí úsáid as allúntas 2018 mar bhunlíne.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Measaim nach dtuigeann iad ar thug an freagra don Aire Stáit go díreach cad atá i gceist agam. Molann an plan forbartha náisiúnta caiteachas caipitil iomlán de €1.188 billiún idir 2018 agus 2027. As an iomlán sin ní chaithfear ach €178 milliún, 15% den chaiteachas, ar an nGaeilge, an Ghaeltacht agus na hoileáin. Sa phlean forbartha náisiúnta, Transforming Ireland, a bhí ann roimhe - idir 2007 agus 2013 - cuireadh €2.1 billiún i leataobh do na healaíona, an oidhreacht, an Ghaeltacht agus na hoileáin ach bhí 22% den fhigiúr seo geallta don Ghaeltacht. Tá difríocht mhór idir 22% agus 15%. Ní mise a chuir na figiúirí sin le chéile ach grúpa a dhein taighde air seo, grúpa darb ainm Teach Aniar. Chuir an grúpa sin na figiúirí faoi bhráid an phobail. Cén cúis atá leis an titim ollmhór ó thaobh céatadán de agus ó thaobh airgeadais de? An dtuigeann an tAire Stáit go bhfuil an teanga go mór i mbaol agus gur gá caiteachas a mhéadú seachas go mbeadh ciorruithe ann?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Tuigim an cheist. Tá figiúir difriúil ann ó 2007. Bhí an t-am thar a bheith difriúil. Bhí an t-airgead ag fás ar na crainn ag an am sin.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá sé sin seafóideach.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Níl an Teachta Ó Cuív ag cur na ceiste orm. Tá plan forbartha

don Ghaeltacht agus do na hoileáin againn anois. Mar shampla, beimid ag brú ar aghaidh leis an uasghrádú ar roinnt príomhchampas de chuid na coláistí samhraidh Gaeilge. Meallann na tionscadail sin os cionn 26,000 scoláirí chun na Gaeltachta achan bhliain. Mar shampla eile, táimid ag soláthar saoráidí tacaíochta teanga agus cúram leanaí a bheidh suite in áiteanna straitéiseacha. Beidh oifigí nua ann do chomharchumainn agus saoráidí pobail ar Inis Meáin. Tá cúpla sampla eile - síneadh le Cé Inis Oírr lena n-airítear tonnchosc, oibrithe ar Ché Inis Meáin, uasghradú ar Ché Mhachaire Rabhartaigh a dhéanfaidh freastal ar Thóraigh, agus rudaí faoi leith do Thóraigh fosta. Cúpla sampla iad sin. Tá an t-am atá ann anois difriúil ón am a bhí ann in 2007.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach): Beidh freagra eile ag an Aire Stáit.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá an ceart ag an Teachta Ó Cuív arís. Ní thuigeann an tAire Stáit an cheist.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Ní thuigeann an Teachta an freagra.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Ní thuigeann sé é.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Maidir leis an airgead atá i gceist, ba é an tréimhse atá i gceist - 2008 go dtí 2016 - an tréimhse ina raibh muid in ísle brí. Caitheadh €224 milliún faoi Transforming Ireland. An rud atá i gceist sa tréimhse amach anseo ná go gcaithfear €178 milliún. Tá níos lú airgid le caitheamh againn anois mar is é sin €46 milliún níos lú ná mar a bhí againn sa tréimhse ina raibh muid in ísle brí. Níl muid ag dul chun tosaigh, táimid ag dul ar chúl. An dream a dhein an taighde seo - Teacht Aniar - dhein siad é le cur faoi bhráid chomhdháil pleanála teanga. Ní feidir pleanáil teanga ceart a dhéanamh muna dhéanfar infheistíocht cheart. Tá beagán athruithe ag tarlú ach measaim nach dtuigeann an córas ina iomlán an géarchéim mhór atá ann. Ba chóir go mbeadh an buiséad ag fás seachas a bheith ag dul ar chúl.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Tuigim an cheist. Tá an figiúr difriúil. B'fhéidir nach bhfuil a fhios ag an Teachta ach níor chuir muid an plean i bhfeidhm in 2007. Ní raibh an t-airgead ar fáil. Bhí an ghéarchéim ag teacht ag an am agus d'athraíodh an plean sin a bhí socraithe. Níor chuir an Rialtas an plean i bhfeidhm ag an am sin. Ní raibh muid ábalta an gealltanais a thug an Rialtas ag an am sin in 2007 a chur i bhfeidhm mar ní raibh an t-airgead ar fáil. Ach anois, céim ar chéim, tá cúrsaí eacnamaíochta ag bogadh ar aghaidh. Beidh airgead breise ar fáil. Dá mbeadh airgead breise ar fáil faoi choinne infreastrúchtúir nó pleanála teanga ba mise an fear a chaithfeadh an t-airgead. Tá sé difriúil anois ó 2007. Ní bheidh mé ag déanamh gealltanais cosúil leis an cheann a rinneadh.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Níl mé ag caint faoin méid a bhí le caitheamh i Transforming Ireland. Is é seo an méid a caitheadh agus a bhí sa bhuiséad chuile bhliain.

Limistéir Pleanála Teanga

3. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta céard é líon na bpleananna teanga atá á gcur i bhfeidhm i mbliana, taobh istigh agus taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht faoi seach; cén caiteachas atá ceadaithe do na pleananna seo i mbliana; céard é an caiteachas go dáta; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [26804/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Caithfear faire amach don fhocláíocht sa cheist seo. Níl mé ag

iarraidh a fháil amach faoi phleananna atá á réiteach. Tá mé ag caint ar phleananna atá á gcur i bhfeidhm. Cé mhéad plean teanga atá á chur i bhfeidhm taobh istigh agus taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht? Cén caiteachas atá ceadaithe do na pleananna sin? Níor chóir go gcuirfeadh an tAire Stáit san áireamh airgead atá curtha i leataobh le pleananna a réiteach, mar níl sé sin sa gceist.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Ar bhonn an cheist a fuair mise, maidir le staid reatha an phróisis pleanála teanga trí chéile ó thaobh na Gaeltachta de, tá an próiseas idir lámha i ngach aon cheann den 26 limistéar pleanála teanga Gaeltachta faoi láthair. Tá ocht bplean teanga ceadaithe faoin bpróiseas go dáta. Is iad na limistéir atá ceadaithe ná: Cois Fharraige; Gaoth Dobhair, Rann na Feirste, Anagaire agus Loch an Iúir; Cloch Chionaola, Gort an Choirce, An Fál Carrach agus Machaire Rabhartaigh; Na Déise; Muscraí; Ciarraí theas; Dúiche Sheoigheach agus Tuar Mhic Éadaigh; agus Ciarraí thiar. Tá na ceanneagraíochtaí sna limistéir seo i mbun ullmhúchán chun na pleananna a chur i bhfeidhm dá réir, i gcomhar le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta. Tá pleananna teanga á mbreithniú ag mo Roinn faoi láthair i leith an ceithre limistéar a leanas: An Cheathrú Rua; Maigh Eo thuaidh; Árainn Mhór; agus Conamara láir.

Lena chois sin táthar ag súil leis go mbeidh pleananna i leith an sé limistéar a leanas á gcur faoi bhráid na Roinne ag Údarás na Gaeltachta idir seo agus deireadh na bliana: Ceantar na nOileán; Ráth Chairn agus Baile Ghib; Dún na nGall theas; Tóraigh; tuaisceart Dhún na nGall; agus Oileán Árann.

Ceaptar go mbeidh pleananna teanga i leith an naoi gceantar eile atá i gceist curtha faoi bhráid mo Roinne chun críche faofa roimh 2020. Maidir leis na bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta, a bhí san áireamh sa cheist a chur an Teachta, tá ullmhúchán pleananna ar siúl faoi láthair i leith: Daingean Uí Chúis; An Clochán Liath; cathair na Gaillimhe; cathair Chorcaí; Leitir Ceanainn; Trá Lí agus Dún Garbháin. Maidir leis na líonraí Gaeilge, tá ullmhúchán pleananna idir lámha i leith Cluain Dolcáin, Inis agus Baile Locha Riach.

Mar a bhaineann sé le 2018, tá allúntas ar fiú €2.65 milliún curtha ar fáil faoin gciste sa bhliain reatha. Bainfear úsáid as an gciste seo chun na rudaí seo a leanas a dhéanamh go príomha: leanúint le tacaíocht a chur ar fáil mar a bhaineann sé le hullmhúchán pleananna; agus allúntas ar bhonn limistéir pleanála teanga Gaeltachta, ar fiú suas le €100,000 go bliantúil a chur ar fáil chun tacú le feidhmiú pleananna faofa.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Níl fhios agam ar léigh an tAire Stáit an cheist. An cheist a bhí ann ná cad iad líon na bpleananna teanga atá á gcur i bhfeidhm i mbliana taobh istigh nó taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Thug an tAire Stáit freagra, nach mór, ar an gcuid sin den cheist. Níl aon bhaint aige leis an airgead atá ceadaithe do rudaí eile leis an gcaiteachas atá ceadaithe do na pleananna seo i mbliana. Céard é an caiteachas cothrom le dáta atá leis seo? An bhféadfá a rá liom, mar a d'iarr mé, ceist an-simplí í, cé mhéad airgead atá ceadaithe do na pleananna atá faofa ag an Aire Stáit cothrom le dáta atá le caitheamh i mbliana? Uimhir a dó, cé mhéad de sin atá caite cothrom le dáta? Glacaim leis go bhfuil a fhios ag an Aire gurb é seo an 21 lá de Mheitheamh 2018.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Go raibh míle maith agat. Tá Foras na Gaeilge freagrach as na pleananna teanga taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht agus tá Údarás na Gaeltachta freagrach as na pleananna teanga a chur i bhfeidhm le pobal na Gaeltachta laistigh den Ghaeltacht, mar a bhfuil a fhios ag an Teachta. Ní bheidh mise nó an Roinn freagrach as an airgead a ghabháil díreach chuig na grúpaí éagsúla. Táim ag fanacht ar na billí ó Údarás na Gaeltachta agus Foras na

Gaeilge, dá bharr níl a fhios agam inniu cé mhéad a bheidh i gceist. B'shin an fáth leis seo. Thug mé gealltanús €2.6 milliún a thabhairt d'Údarás na Gaeltachta, d'Fhoras na Gaeilge agus do phobal na Gaeilge laistigh den Ghaeltacht agus lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht, agus tá €2.6 milliún ar fáil i mbliana fa choinne na pleananna teanga a chur i bhfeidhm. Anois tá ocht díobh ag bogadh ar aghaidh laistigh den Ghaeltacht, mar a bhfuil a fhios ag an Teachta, agus idir €100,000 agus €150,000 i gceist le haghaidh dreamanna difriúla. Anois táim ag fanacht-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Duine amháin le bhur dtoil---

Deputy Joe McHugh: Cúig-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): An Teachta Ó Cuív anois.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Bunaithe ar an meán de €150,000, má mhéadaíonn duine €150,000 - mar a d'admhaigh an tAire féin níl €150,000 i gceist le cuid acu - faoi 13, ní bhfaighidh duine €2.67 milliún. Tá go leor rudaí eile clúdaithe faoin gceannnteideal pleanála teanga. I gcónaí riamh, bhí Aire na Gaeltachta in ann eolas a fháil ó Fhoras na Gaeilge agus ó Údarás na Gaeltachta maidir le ceisteanna Dála.

An bhfuil an tAire ag rá liomsa nach raibh sé in ann a fháil amach ó Fhoras na Gaeilge agus ó Údarás na Gaeltachta cé mhéad airgead atá ceadaithe acu do chur i bhfeidhm pleananna teanga i mbliana, agus nach bhfuil a fhios ag an Roinn é sin, agus nach raibh sé in ann ceist a chur orthu cé mhéad de sin atá caite cothrom le dáta ar chur i bhfeidhm pleananna teanga nó an é atá ar bun ag an Aire ná go bhfuil sé ag seachaint na gceisteanna?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Níl na sonraí agam inniu i dtaobh an cheangail idir Fhoras na Gaeilge, an Roinn agus Údarás na Gaeltachta maidir leis an airgead a bhí i gceist i dtaobh na mbillí ach bheinn sásta na sonraí sin a fháil amach agus é sin a dhéanamh don Teachta.

D'ardaigh an Teachta ceist i dtaobh na difríochta idir €100,000 agus €150,000 fosta agus tá an ceart ag an Teachta. Bhí conspóidí móra ag an am a sheolamar an plan. Bhí €100,000 i gceist agus d'athraigh mé le linn dom comhrá a bheith agam faoi ag an am agus bhí coimhlíní ollmhóra idir phobail na Gaeltachta agus Roinn na Gaeltachta. Ba iad na daonraí láidre agus an tíreolaíocht láidir na príomh-spriocanna agus na coinníollacha ba chúis leis an rogha a dhéanamh faoi cén dream agus cén limistéar pleanála teanga a bheadh ag fáil an t-airgead breise.

Maidir leis an gceist i dtaobh sonraí na mbillí a bheidh ag teacht ó Fhoras na Gaeilge agus Údarás na Gaeltachta, beidh mé sásta na sonraí sin a fháil agus beidh mé i dteagmháil leis an Teachta.

Question No. 4 replied to with Written Answers

Wildlife Protection

5. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her plans to submit amendments to the Heritage Bill 2016 on Report Stage in Dáil Éireann to remove the extension of the hedge-cutting and burning seasons into August and March, respectively, in view of the effects such an extension would have on wildlife; and if she will make a

statement on the matter. [27283/18]

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I tabled this question because I believe Ireland should set itself a national goal to restore the curlew, to stop the Irish curlew becoming extinct and to maintain the cry of the curlew on our land. It is of deep importance to us to maintain a connection to nature. It would be a tragedy to lose that bird or to lose the yellowhammer, which is also under threat from the provisions of the Heritage Bill that the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan, is bringing forward. I would go as far to say that we should go all out to try to protect the corncrake. In doing that we would be protecting our natural environment, which protects us and our place on this planet.

Will the Minister, Deputy Madigan, consider doing this in amendments to the Heritage Bill?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Section 40 of the Wildlife Act, as amended, prohibits the cutting, grubbing, burning or destruction of vegetation, with certain strict exemptions, from 1 March to 31 August.

Following a review of section 40, which included consideration of submissions from interested parties, proposals were announced in December 2015 to introduce legislation to allow for managed hedge cutting and burning at certain times within the existing closed period on a pilot two-year basis. The relevant legislation is included in the Heritage Bill 2016, which was published in January 2016.

The Bill has completed its passage through Seanad Éireann and completed Committee Stage, when Deputy Ryan contributed, in Dáil Éireann last month. In the meantime, the existing provisions relating to section 40 of the Wildlife Act remain in force.

The provision on burning in the Bill will not allow all landowners to burn vegetation on any day during the month of March. It provides that the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht may make regulations to allow burning in certain areas of the country, for example in a county or counties or parts of a county, at specified periods in the month of March. It does not, therefore, allow for widespread burning of vegetation, which in turn relates to the Deputy's concerns around wildlife.

The regulations will permit controlled burning only and only in years where the winter rainfall is higher than average. The regulations will refer to the requirements for consent on any Natura-designated sites and refer also to other relevant legislation on burning of lands. In addition to regulations, advice and guidelines will be issued to ensure that best practice will be followed in respect of burning.

I am fully aware that hedgerows are a very important wildlife habitat, providing food, shelter, corridors of movement, nest and hibernation sites. It is my intention that the change in timing of cutting set out in section 7 of the Heritage Bill would not interfere with this.

Ireland has some 300,000 km of hedgerow mainly surrounding fields and properties across the country and only roadside hedges are subject to the provisions of the Heritage Bill, which is a fraction of the entirety of the total hedgerow resource in this country.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Minister is aware that BirdWatch Ireland, An Taisce and the Irish Wildlife Trust all raise real concerns that the provisions in the Minister's Bill will actually threaten the revival of the curlew and the survival of yellowhammers in Ireland. I put it to

the Minister that these organisations are important voices in this matter because of their huge experience and their work in the area, and they should be listened to.

Last year the Department set up a special task force to look at the protection of the curlew. Where is that task force at? What is the Minister going to do and how will we do it? What is the Minister's plan so we do not lose the cry of the curlew? It is where we are going currently. There has been a 95% drop in curlew numbers in the past 40 years. This is largely due to the loss of habitat, a situation that will be worsened by the provisions in the Minister's Bill. Will she not join with BirdWatch Ireland, An Taisce and others in this iconic and necessary challenge? What will she do to bring these birds back?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The Deputy is aware that the curlew has been in longitudinal decline. The Green Party did not put a conservation programme in place, but we have done so, as the Deputy mentioned. We established the curlew task force and the curlew conservation programme in order to help the curlew. In the period 2016 to 2018, my predecessors and I approved €500,000 for the curlew conservation programme.

The primary issues for breeding curlew in Ireland include habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation, exacerbated by unsustainable predation rates. According to Dr. Barry O'Donoghue, however, whose testimony the Deputy is aware I gave on Committee Stage and who is the national expert on the curlew, burning is not suspected to be a significant cause of the population decline, given that localised burning was a traditional practice in the hills throughout the time when the curlew and other species like red grouse flourished in Ireland while the strongholds for curlew in Britain happened to be on the grouse moors, which are managed, including by burning.

Regarding the Heritage Bill, there are regulations on the cutting of hedges and provisions on burning.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: What the Minister is doing is loosening the regulations. Last Monday, we saw what happened when there was no proper enforcement of environmental laws, with people ignoring the laws that restrict illegal dumping. I have a similar fear that, when the Minister gives the go-ahead for people to start cutting hedges in August and burning uplands, we will see a further degradation of the key environments that we need to protect to maintain birdlife and all other associated life, for example, butterflies, bees, etc. The Minister is engaging in a destruction of the environment, which will lead inexorably to a loss of species and a narrowing of biodiversity. I am sickened. The Government was lined up yesterday to talk about how we would be great on the environment and climate but there is a connection between being good on the climate and protecting habitats, restoring diversity, marshlands and uplands and allowing nature to flourish. The Government cannot be seen as being serious on one if, on the other, it is telling people to start the flails going in August and to burn the hills in March. Everyone knows that having no enforcement of environmental rules is a recipe for disaster but the Minister is lighting the flame-thrower and bringing the hedge cutters. She will be responsible for that.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: It is important that when we discuss issues as significant as our natural heritage, we not scaremonger or use hyperbolic or emotive language in place of an examination of the facts. For example, it is a fact that the regulations on cutting will limit the current year's growth only. There will be no widescale deep cutting or cutting with heavy machinery or flails. The Deputy is aware of another fact, that being it is an offence under section

22 of the Wildlife Act to destroy, injure or mutilate wilfully the eggs or nests of any bird species. It is a crime to touch a nest and anyone cutting the hedge is obliged to check for nests. There is enforcement of these provisions under the Wildlife Acts, as the Deputy is aware.

The Bill's provisions on burning are being introduced on a pilot basis only, will restrict and regulate burning to just one month and will have a limited timespan of two years. After that time, we will be in a position to be informed on how the pilot has worked. As we know, 14% of the country is designated under the habitats and birds directives, so burning in any designated area is an ARC, that is, an activity requiring ministerial consent.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We must now move on to Other Questions.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: May I make a final comment?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Make it short.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: To aid in having a factual debate, will the Minister please send me the data via written response on the number of prosecutions under the section she just mentioned? Show me the evidence that we have any effective enforcement. I might believe her then but I do not now. By loosening the regulations, she will make matters worse.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I will send the data. That would be no problem.

Other Questions

Special Areas of Conservation Management

6. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the action she plans to take on foot of the concerns expressed by An Taisce regarding the impact of the use of Skellig Michael as a filming location and its request for strict protocols in respect of this to be introduced. [26709/18]

Deputy Joan Burton: In light of the concerns expressed by An Taisce about the impact of filming and other activities on the Skelligs, and given that they are an important environmental resource and tourist destination, what structures and protocols does the Minister propose in order to preserve and protect the Skelligs as one of Europe's top destinations?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Sceilg Mhichíl is a national monument in the ownership of the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht under the National Monuments Acts. As such, it enjoys the full range of protections afforded by those Acts, including a requirement that any work at or in proximity to it are subject to my prior written consent. The Skellig Islands themselves form part of the Skelligs special protection area, SPA, which is designated for the protection of various species of seabird and is subject to the provisions of the EU birds and habitats directives.

While recent filming, including the high-profile "Star Wars" filming, led to concerns being raised in some quarters about the potential impact on the SPA, I am satisfied that there have been no adverse impacts. All filming proposals were reviewed by experts in my Department

and subject to screening for appropriate assessment in accordance with the birds and natural habitats regulations. Filming was only permitted where the screening concluded that this was in order and that avoidance and mitigation measures were robust. In addition, stringent conditions and monitoring were put in place by my Department.

In the case of the first filming of “Star Wars”, for example, following discussion with my officials, the film company submitted a revised application with a significant reduction in activity and a redesign of several elements of the original proposal, including a 90% reduction in proposed helicopter activity for the project. The revised proposal was then screened for ecological and species impact and subject to detailed review by the archaeological experts of the National Monuments Service. The screening concluded that, provided the avoidance and mitigation measures proposed by the film company were implemented in full, and subject to 15 special conditions attached to the consent for the project, the proposal would not have a significant effect on the Skelligs SPA.

Filming was limited to a number of days and only on specified parts of the island. The activities of the film crew were supervised at all times by personnel from the Office of Public Works and my Department’s National Monuments Service and National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

On the second occasion of filming in September 2015 after the bird season, conditions were also restrictive, the filming footprint was heavily circumscribed, and duration was limited. As well as implementing strict controls over filming on the island, much of the filming of “Star Wars VIII” took place at Ceann Sibéal on mainland County Kerry rather than on Sceilg Mhichíl itself. The entire catalogue of application, screening, approval, conditions and *ex-post* reports are available online.

Sceilg Mhichíl was inscribed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1996. Information about filming projects, and particularly on ecological issues and assessments undertaken prior to approval for filming, was made available to UNESCO. The *post hoc* ecological and monument assessments were also made available to UNESCO.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister will have seen the extraordinary photo of recent weeks of puffins on the Skelligs using plastic rubbish, detritus from fishing boats and so on to construct their nests.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Scandalous.

Deputy Joan Burton: Experts have said that some of that rubbish has come from across the Atlantic. The Minister will have had an opportunity to visit the area. For anyone who knows it, it is an area of extraordinary and outstanding natural beauty and “Star Wars” going there has been a significant boost to its tourism, but the Minister should take account of the concerns expressed by An Taisce. There must be a balance in preserving what is a fragile ecosystem - notwithstanding the fact that it has endured for thousands and thousands of years - against the risks of modern pollution, such as shown in the recent picture of plastics, and the impact of filming, which has seen the number of people visiting Skellig Michael increase. Does the Minister propose to carry out a detailed study on how to do the best for the islands?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: An Taisce did not list the protocols it wants to see. Its position is that there should be no filming on Skellig Michael and that purist view is simply not sustain-

able. It wrote to us several times during the licensing of the 2015 filming and we responded to each letter. We published the application online and the full approval. We did not hear again from An Taisce on the matter until its letter last December to coincide with the release of “Star Wars VIII”. The letter was released to the press at the same time that it was sent to us and was obviously written to coincide with the sure publicity the movie could get. As a consequence, its negative view got some traction.

With regard to the puffins, in September 2015, most of the birds on the island had departed for the winter, including the puffins. The report published afterwards is unequivocal in stating that there was no impact on the wildlife, the buildings or the structure on Skellig Michael. UNESCO was fully informed and raised no correspondence whatsoever. I am very satisfied with the way that it has been undertaken. An Taisce’s view is second-hand, speculative and uncorroborated, in my view. Incidentally, the shot used in *The Irish Times* when it covered An Taisce’s letter on 21 December was taken not on Skellig Michael but on a set in Sybil Head.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister has probably seen some of the detailed commentary and the commentary relating to nest-building, plastic waste and rubbish. It does not just relate to puffins but gannets too. The Minister would be foolish to be quite so churlish about An Taisce being concerned about the natural environment. Has the Minister taken an opportunity, since she became Minister, to visit this important area? Everybody wants to see the maximum positive development of tourism in this area, which has long been an area which has relied on tourism and its natural beauty for promoting the livelihoods of local people. Equally, one has to protect the environment. What are the Minister’s plans to do that?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I am not remotely churlish about Skellig Michael and I am kept fully briefed and informed about filming on it at all times. There has to be a dose of reality with regard to it and there is some misinformation about it. Skellig Michael lies 14 km offshore in what are euphemistically known as challenging sea conditions and it is cut off by sea for seven months of the year. Its archaeology, which has survived for 15 centuries, is open to the full natural fury of the Atlantic elements. Its biggest challenge is not its visitors. Those numbers can be controlled. It is actually the wild Atlantic elements to which it is exposed. None of those events caused any damage to the ecology, ornithology or archaeology of the island at any stage. I am satisfied with the screening, supervision during filming and the *ex post* ecological report, all of which were published.

Question No. 7 replied to with Written Answers

Heritage Sites

8. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the supports provided to built heritage projects in County Kildare in the past two years; her plans for 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26721/18]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The next question is in the name of Deputy Martin Heydon. I had agreed to ask the supplementary for him. I will allow the question and the Minister to give one answer for the question, if that is all right. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Deputy Heydon has inquired about built heritage projects in County Kildare in the past two years and my plans for 2019, which I believe is also the Acting

Chairman's constituency. Financial support for the protection of heritage buildings and historic structures is provided by my Department through a number of schemes which are generally administered by local authorities. The built heritage investment scheme is a scheme for the repair and conservation of protected structures, that is, structures on the local authority record of protected structures. It is designed to leverage private capital for investment in small-scale conservation projects across the country and to support the employment of skilled conservation professionals. I have allocated funding of €2 million in total for this scheme in 2018. In 2017 and 2018, the built heritage investment scheme provided €100,000 in grant aid for 28 projects in County Kildare.

The structures at risk fund enables conservation works to heritage structures in both private and public ownership that are deemed to be at significant risk of deterioration. I have allocated €1.324 million for the structures at risk fund in 2018. In 2017 and 2018, a total of €119,000 was allocated to five projects in County Kildare under the structures at risk fund. Details of the projects approved under both funding schemes are published on my Department's website and local authority websites. My Department has provided €350,000 in funding to the Office of Public Works in 2018 to assist in the conservation and presentation of historic buildings and national monuments in State ownership. The two Departments continue to work closely together on survey, excavation and research work relating to our national monuments.

The Heritage Council, which my Department funds, also provides grants for the protection and preservation of the built heritage. It is primarily a matter for the Heritage Council to decide how its funding should be allocated across the range of research, education and conservation programmes it supports. With regard to 2019, I am pleased to say that the funding announced as part of the national development plan, NDP, presents a significant opportunity to improve the supports available to owners and custodians of our heritage buildings in conserving and protecting this important and irreplaceable part of our heritage.

Commemorative Events

9. Deputy Aindrias Moynihan asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the funding streams available to groups wishing to hold centenary commemorations of events relating to the War of Independence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27065/18]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: We are well over halfway through the decade of centenaries at this point. Communities throughout the country are commemorating various different events at a grassroots level, taking the initiative and marking those events. I understand that the Minister is carrying out a review of the various different funding streams and the plan from here on. That review has been going on for some months. When will that be available? Will it steer funding, priorities and criteria for those communities that will make grant applications for their various local commemorations?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: One of the most significant lessons from the Ireland 2016 centenary programme was the capacity of local communities to mobilise and achieve successful outcomes when the right structures and supports were put in place to assist their endeavours. The Government's approach to the remembrance of the significant historic events and related themes of the period from 1919 to 1923 will continue to be informed by the guidance of the expert advisory group on centenary commemorations, which is chaired by Dr. Maurice Manning, and by the all-party consultation group, once established. The expert advisory group's second

phase mission statement was launched by my predecessor as Minister, Deputy Humphreys, last October. This statement provides a structure of guiding principles which will assist all interested parties in delivering appropriate commemorations at national and local level.

In its second statement, the advisory group acknowledges the significant role played by local authorities in developing inclusive, citizen-focused, and authentic commemorations. The advisory group believes that they should continue this important work and be supported in their role. I share the view that local authorities will have a key role in supporting engagement by local communities and in developing suitable commemorative initiatives at county level. Following the conclusion of the decade of centenaries public consultation process at the end of February, the advisory group has been considering the guidance that it will provide to assist the Government in commemorating the significant historical events over the remainder of the decade. I expect to receive the group's advice shortly. I am aware that 20 of the 73 submissions received were made by local authorities and I very much appreciate their engagement and observations.

The issue of funding for the local authorities over the remainder of the decade will be examined in the context of the findings of the public consultation process and the guidance provided by the expert advisory group to Government. It will also be considered in the context of the overall approach by Government as part of the normal Estimates process.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister. I acknowledge that local authorities continue to fund groups throughout the country and community groups are enthusiastic and keen to ensure that their commemorations are marked locally. We are right in the middle of 2018 at this point and there are a great many significant commemorations for this year alone, including votes for women, the 1918 general election, the ending of the war and, most significantly, I feel, at the Mouth of the Glen between Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh and Ré na nDoirí. I refer to the first ambush of the War of Independence, where local volunteers engaged with the RIC in July 1918. That engagement is being marked locally. The Minister would have known the timeline and that a review has been under way for almost a year. Why has the review taken so long and is it going to be brought to a conclusion quickly? Communities would like the review to be concluded and for direction to be provided to them in addition to an opportunity to apply for funding and also that the various criteria would be outlined. The review is under way for the best part of a year at this point, in the middle of what would have been a set timeframe, and should be brought to a conclusion soon. Does the Minister have a date for the conclusion of the review? Is she aware that the national commemoration for July almost clashes with the Mouth of the Glen commemoration in the same month?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The previous Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys, announced that the Department would re-establish the consultative group on commemorations following its success in the lead-up to the State's commemoration of the 1916 centenary. We need an all-party representation on the group to ensure a balanced perspective on what is a contentious period in our history. Nominations have been sought from all parties represented in the Oireachtas, including Independents, as well as representatives from the Northern Ireland Assembly. We want the consultative group to meet as soon as possible so as to ensure the best possible commemorations in the coming years.

One of the historic events we hope to commemorate appropriately is the founding of Dáil Éireann in 1919. The first meeting was on 21 January 1919 and it is one of the most significant historic events in the decade of centenaries and deserves to be commemorated accordingly.

The Houses of the Oireachtas is advancing plans for a ceremonial event to mark that. Another period to commemorate is the struggle for independence from 1919 to 1921. Deputy Aindrias Moynihan mentioned the War of Independence, which is the name commonly used to describe the guerrilla warfare fought between the Irish Republican Army and the British security forces in Ireland, and we also have that centenary commemoration.

In relation to the clash mentioned by Deputy Moynihan, we cannot prescribe to local authorities on how they should commemorate events locally. It would be better if they consulted directly with the Department.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I gceann cúpla seachtain, ag tús mhí Iúil, beidh muintir Bhéal Átha an Ghaorthaidh agus muintir Mhúscaí ag ceiliúradh nó ag comóradh an chéad luíochán i gCogadh na Saoirse, a tharla i mBéal a' Ghleanna. Tá sé an-tábhachtach a leithéid a chomóradh. Beidh fáilte roimh an Aire má bhíonn sí ann.

It is very important that communities have the opportunity to do something and the resources to go ahead and make sure those significant events are commemorated. I understand the Minister is still conducting the review, that the committee has only met twice and that it does not have an outcome yet. When does the Minister expect the committee to conclude the review? Will it report directly to the Minister?

I acknowledge that local authorities are continuing to support the process but they need direction and a steer from national Government and the Minister should put in place a plan and not land State events on top of significant events such as the first ambush of the War of Independence at the Mouth of the Glen.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: As someone who has been a member of the all-party committee on commemorations since 2006 when it was first mooted by Bertie Ahern, I believe it is a good scheme and it needs to happen. Most of the ideas the State used came through that mechanism. The Minister is now running out of time.

Local authorities were brought on board late in the day for the 2016 commemorations and they delivered a lot better than was expected considering the very short notice. I appeal to the Minister to bring the consultation to a conclusion and to allocate the money in the budget in order that planning can go ahead.

One of the things that was also successful during 2016 was the national capital projects. They take a lot more planning than six months. We are running very close to An Chéad Dáil commemoration events and the election before that, but there are also key moments during the war and some planning is required so that we end up with some capital projects, some monumental events and have some monuments left behind. That cannot happen overnight.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I have consistently been asking the Minister questions about the all-party committee that was advising on the commemorations and she keeps giving the response that it will happen shortly and that she is waiting for nominations. The various groups were asked to make those nominations six or eight months ago, if not longer. Surely it is time to tell them that the train is leaving the station and it is fine if they want to jump on at this station at the beginning, and it is also fine if they want to join later, but they cannot hold up the entire process. They have had the chance. When will the committee meet, with or without those final nominations?

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Deputy Joan Burton: I understand that the Minister has a lot on her desk but the commemorations are really important at both a national and local level. They are not just about commemorating the actual first meeting of the Dáil. The local commemorations are really important. The Minister must offer support to having a national structure. What we had for the 1916 commemoration was very inclusive. It reflected communities and people were drawn from a wide range of organisations and none. The involvement by the Government was agreed by everybody in the House to be extremely successful. I share the concern that for some reason or other nothing much seems to be happening for the next series of commemorations. If the Minister allows a vacuum to develop then others may fill the vacuum in a way which will be far less inclusive than what we successfully achieved in 2016.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I accept all the points raised by the Deputies. I could not agree more. There has been some difficulty getting an all-party committee and getting all parties to nominate people to give their views on how to proceed.

Deputy Joan Burton: Why not ask the spokespeople?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I will just finish. However, I have indicated that the first sitting will be happening in the next couple of weeks, regardless, because we want it to be inclusive, as Deputy Burton mentioned. I am very conscious of the time. It is very important that we have a balanced representation on the committee. The aim of any commemoration is to broaden sympathies without having to abandon any loyalties and to make sure that we reflect everybody's perspective.

In relation to regional funding, I do expect that local authorities will have a key role in supporting engagement and facilitation in local communities and in developing appropriate commemorative initiatives as part of the decade of centenaries. That integration is going to be really vital for local communities and that everybody is involved. I will do my utmost to make sure that everything is as successful as it was for the 2016 commemoration.

Questions Nos. 10 and 11 replied to with Written Answers.

Film Industry

12. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she was consulted in relation to the sale of a studio (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27114/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Ardmore Studios is a very strategic facility. It was sold recently and I understand the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation was involved. Was the Minister consulted about the sale and were concerns expressed about the vulnerability of Ardmore's future as a studio?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The sale of the studio referred to by the Deputy is first and foremost a matter for my colleague the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Heather Humphreys. I can confirm, however, that her Department has kept my Department informed of the progress and ultimate acquisition of the facility in question. In March this year I issued a press release welcoming the acquisition of the studios by an Irish company. Ireland is an attractive location for film production and the facility referred to by the Deputy will continue

to operate as a studio.

I want to ensure that Ireland continues as an attractive location for film production and also becomes a global leader in this area. On Monday last, 18 June, the name of the Irish Film Board was changed to Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland.

Fís Éireann or Screen Ireland is the national development agency for the Irish film, television drama and animation industry. Its statutory remit is to assist and encourage the making of film in the State and the development of the industry in Ireland. In 2018, €18 million was allocated to Screen Ireland, an increase of €1.55 million from the previous year. Screen Ireland also supports the Irish screen industries at major international markets and festivals, promotes inward investment and the use of Ireland as a location for international production, and provides support for companies filming in Ireland. Screen Ireland liaises with IDA Ireland and Tourism Ireland to maximise opportunities for the promotion of Ireland as a location for film production. Information on its funding scheme is available on its website.

The Government also supports the film industry through the film tax credit scheme, as provided for in section 481 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. The twin approach of direct funding and tax expenditure measures maximises the benefits of the Government's support to the audiovisual industry. In addition, pillar four of the Creative Ireland programme focuses on Ireland's potential to be a global leader in film production, television drama, documentary, children's storytelling and animation.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Just to satisfy my idle curiosity, I ask the Minister to explain why the Irish and English versions of the name are totally different. Screen Ireland is translated as "Fís Éireann" but the word "fís" means "vision", while the Irish for the word "screen" is "scáileán". Why does this anomaly with regard to the name exist? Which word more truly reflects the nature of this body? Is it "Fís" in the Irish title or "Screen" in the English title?

Deputy Joan Burton: I totally agree with Deputy Ó Cuív's comment on the translation. When I saw it I wondered about it too because the word "fís" has a very particular meaning in Irish relating to a vision. That is how the word is used. For example, it features as a title in much academic discussion and political commentary. It is an odd translation.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Deputies for their comments. On the issue of use of the word "fís", we need to have a vision for film, television and all of the new platforms. A digital revolution is taking place around the world and the word "fís" encompasses it more than the word "scáileán" would. The former is also easier to remember than the direct Irish translation of screen.

On the issue of Ardmore Studios to which the Deputy's original question refers, Enterprise Ireland requires the consent of its parent Department to dispose of State assets. In this context, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation maintained contact with my Department during the sale process to keep us briefed on developments, while also noting that the Department had no formal role in the process. The Department did not have a view as to who should own the studio but only that the studio would continue as a key asset underpinning the development of the Irish film industry. Ultimately, the decision to dispose of the Enterprise Ireland shareholding was a matter for the board of Enterprise Ireland and was subject to the approval of the relevant Minister. The process concluded when the Minister for Business, Enterprise and

Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, wrote to me on 6 March 2018 to inform me of her decision to approve the proposed disposal by Enterprise Ireland of its minority shareholding on the terms recommended by its board.

The Ardmore site is currently zoned for film industry use only. This protection is due to run for at least another five years under the Bray municipal district local area plan. The site cannot be used for non-film industry development without the agreement of Wicklow County Council to alter the current zoning restriction. It is important that Ireland remains at the forefront of the audiovisual sector and this is one of the main aims of Global 2025, which the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and I launched recently.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Given that we are talking about the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, I presume that Fís Éireann was the original name which was translated into English and not the other way around. It baffles me as to why, having called it Fís Éireann, the Department did not call it Vision Ireland but my puzzlement will continue.

Given the price of residential land in the Bray area, is the Minister concerned that there is a significant possibility that the Ardmore site might be rezoned as residential land? In such circumstances, it would be impossible to ensure the site would be retained for film making in the context of profitability. Does the Minister agree that there is an absolute need to have ready-made production facilities in this country if we are to continue to attract major film and screen projects?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I have no control over what a local authority decides to do into the future but the site cannot be used at the moment for non-film industry development without the agreement of Wicklow County Council to alter the current zoning restriction.

The Olsberg report was published on foot of an economic analysis of the Irish audiovisual industry. It found that the industry generated almost 17,000 jobs in 2016 and added almost €1.1 billion to the economy, which could increase to €1.46 billion. The headline figures in the report relate to radio production as well as film, television, animation, commercial advertising and video game production.

Heritage Centres

13. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht when the cultural and heritage centre at a location (details supplied) will begin hosting exhibitions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27112/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: An arrangement was arrived at with the Bank of Ireland on College Green in Dublin, under which the State would be given the use of a facility for ten years to host exhibitions. When will this happen because it has been a long time coming?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I am delighted to inform the Deputy that the cultural and heritage centre at Bank of Ireland on College Green will be launched on Wednesday, 4 July 2018. I will open the new centre alongside Ms Francesca McDonagh, the chief executive of Bank of Ireland. The first exhibition to be housed at the centre is entitled “Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again”. It will celebrate the life and work of our great Nobel Prize winning poet and will be launched by President Michael D. Higgins on the same day. The centre and new exhibition will

open to the public on 6 July. The exhibition will draw on the extensive literary archive donated to the National Library in 2011. I take this opportunity to thank the Heaney family for their remarkable philanthropy and for strongly supporting this initiative. The exhibition will be an exciting partnership between the State and the private sector and will run for four years.

The Heaney exhibition will be the first at this dynamic new cultural and heritage centre at the Bank of Ireland's premises on College Green in Dublin which is the home of Ireland's first Parliament. Part of this iconic building has now been transformed to welcome the public in partnership with the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The exhibition will be accessed by the public through the Gandon designed entrance to the College Green building on Westmoreland Street, which has not been used for many years. It will be a superb addition to the cultural landscape of Dublin. The recent opening of the Luas line across Dublin city centre will facilitate visitors and tourists in coming to an area that has been little more than a pedestrian and traffic thoroughway for too long. The new culture and heritage centre at the Bank of Ireland premises is held under licence between the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the bank for ten years from 27 November 2017. The National Library of Ireland, through a memorandum of understanding, is responsible for the first exhibition to be hosted at this unique venue. It is envisaged that further exhibitions involving other national cultural institutions will be hosted at the venue in the future.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am not certain that it was the first parliament. My father wrote a book about *parlaimint na mban*, or the women's parliament. I must check the date to find out whether the Minister is correct. On a more serious note, the agreement to use this venue for ten years was reached four and a half years ago. Why did it take so long to get this up and running? On the day the doors open, will we have five and a half years to go or ten years to go? It will be most disappointing if there are just five and a half years to go.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: As I mentioned, this venue will open to the public on 6 July next. The Deputy will appreciate that organising something of this significant nature involved the collation of archival records as well as the Seamus Heaney collection. I thank his family for the work involved. A great deal of work, including work on the building, has had to be done to put an exhibition of this size together and bring it to the public. Expressions of interest were called for in 2014 to animate the centre. Submissions were received from a number of institutions and organisations. An expert selection committee was established to examine the submissions. The National Library of Ireland was selected for its proposal to curate an exhibition on the life and works of Seamus Heaney. As I have said, the exhibition is based on the literary archives which were donated to the library by Seamus Heaney and his family in 2011. The exhibition, which is entitled "Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again", is curated by the National Library of Ireland and by Professor Geraldine Higgins, who previously curated Emory University's successful Heaney exhibition, "The Music of What Happens", which celebrated the life and work of the great Nobel Prize-winning poet.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The first meeting of the First Dáil, the lasting effect of which we are still talking about almost 100 years later, was organised in less than two months. The timescale was even shorter than I thought it was when I raised this matter with the Minister previously. It seems extraordinary that the venture now coming on stream was announced in February 2014, which was almost four and a half years ago. I will repeat the simple and plain question I have already asked. Does the ten-year period for which this venue is being made available start in 2018, or are we still working on the basis that it started in 2014? If there are just five and a half years to go, we have spent nearly half of the time getting the first exhibition going.

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Deputy Josepha Madigan: As I said in my original response, this venue is held under licence for ten years from 27 November 2017. No time has been lost. The official opening will take place on 4 July next. The exhibition, which will be free for everyone, will run for between three and five years. It is the aspiration of the National Library of Ireland that the exhibition will move permanently to the library's historic building on Kildare Street at the end of that period. It will take its place there alongside the award-winning exhibition dedicated to W.B. Yeats. This will bring two of Ireland's greatest writers together in a library they both loved. The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht has given the National Library of Ireland an additional capital grant of €615,000 towards the cost of designing and building the exhibition. Bank of Ireland has generously provided the space in College Green and will contribute towards the cost of running the centre.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The question has not been answered.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Chair has no function in that business.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Chair does have such a function under the new Standing Orders.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy will have to write to the Ceann Comhairle if he wants a different answer to the question.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Chair is incorrect. If the Chair checks the Standing Order, he will see that-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We are not going to have a debate on it now.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: -----this can be raised.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): If the Deputy was sitting in this Chair, he would not allow a debate on it either.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I would.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): In honour of the decision he would make in that kind of situation, we will move onto Question No. 17, in the name of Deputy Burton.

Questions Nos. 14 to 16, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

National Museum

17. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the progress which has been made in the filling of vacancies on the board of the National Museum of Ireland; the process by which the vacancies will be filled; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26711/18]

Deputy Joan Burton: I ask the Minister to update the House on the filling of vacancies on the board of the National Museum of Ireland. She will be aware that there have been a number of difficulties at the museum. I await the Minister's report on the filling of the vacancies.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: There are three vacancies on the board of the National Museum of Ireland, two of which are for ordinary members of the board and one of which is for the staff nomination to the board. Section 19(1) of the National Cultural Institutions Act 1997 provides that “the Board of the Museum shall consist of a chairperson and not less than 13 or more than 15 ordinary members who shall be appointed to be members of the Board of the Museum by the Minister”. Under the procedures put in place to appoint members of State boards, the process of filling two of the current vacancies on the board of the museum will be run by the Public Appointments Service. An assessment panel will be convened to consider and assess the expressions of interest received. A shortlist of suitable candidates will then be prepared to be sent forward for my consideration. Officials in the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht are working with the National Museum of Ireland and the Public Appointments Service to prepare the appropriate call for expressions of interest to serve on the board. It is expected that this will be finalised shortly and will then be advertised on *www.stateboards.ie*.

The process for appointing the staff member to the board is set out in section 19(6) of the 1997 Act, which provides that the person in question “shall be selected by the Minister from a panel of not less than 4 persons (of whom not less than 2 shall be women and not less than 2 shall be men) [and whose names shall] be submitted to him or her by the members of staff” of the museum. There was an insufficient number of staff nominations from the museum following the initial call for nominations. The Department has written to the museum to ask for additional nominations, following which I will make a staff appointment to the board in accordance with section 19(6) of the 1997 Act. The final form was sent for ministerial approval in recent days so that the vacancies can be advertised by the Public Appointments Service. There was a particular focus on the skill sets to be included on the form. As I have said, there are two vacancies for ordinary members of the board and there is one vacancy for the staff nomination to the board.

Deputy Joan Burton: Why is it taking so long? These vacancies came up at the end of last year or early this year. We are now into the middle of the year. The Minister has suggested that they are just about to be posted. Can she give us a timeline for how long it will take to fill these vacancies? The difficulties which have beset the board of the museum have been debated in this House on a number of occasions. I refer, for example, to staff issues like the level of unhappiness among those who work at the museum. Can the Minister say how long this procedure is likely to take? Does she have a timeline? If one of our major institutions were to have insufficient representation on its board, it would imply that there is a significant weakness in the organisation. Is the Minister going to prioritise this matter? Can she tell us whether it will take another month, two months or three months? Can she give us a timeline?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I should have mentioned in my initial response that earlier today, I signed the ministerial approval for the vacancies to go to advertisement. I will give an overview of the process. The vacancies on the board arose in January. A number of legal and interpretation issues arose as the Department was preparing to advertise the vacancies. The process of preparing to make new appointments to State boards requires a reasonable degree of consideration by the boards of State bodies, the Department and the Public Appointments Service. This can take some time. A number of legal and technical issues regarding the process arose in this case but have now been ironed out. The appointments are now ready to be advertised and this should happen shortly. As I said, there are two vacancies for ordinary members of the board of the museum. The Department wrote to the acting director in January and sent a reminder in February. We requested legal advice in March. We sent another reminder in April.

Suffice to say it is now all *in situ* and we should hopefully have those appointments made in a matter of weeks.

Deputy Joan Burton: Can the Minister say for how long they have to be advertised and how long it will take the Public Appointments Service, PAS, to examine the applications and make recommendations to the Minister? The Minister will then presumably have to submit these appointments for approval by Government or Cabinet. Can she give an estimate of how long this process is likely to take? She has referred to legal difficulties and perhaps procedural difficulties. Would she care to enlighten us on what the legal difficulties may have been? Can she just tell us when she is going to get on with it and when the appointments are going to be made? They will land on her desk and I assume she will make a selection from those persons deemed by the PAS to be eligible and suitable for appointment.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I signed the ministerial approval earlier today-----

Deputy Joan Burton: No, this question is about the advertisement.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I cannot give the Deputy a definitive timeline as to when PAS will come back to me with a shortlist process but I imagine it will be a matter of weeks rather than months. It is important that we get these appointments made as soon as possible. As I mentioned in my first response, the museum did not give us four names. We were only given three, which was not sufficient. Under section 19 of the Act there is a requirement for four nominees to be forwarded to the Minister for consideration. There was formal legal advice received on 22 May stating that it would be prudent for the Department to consider writing to the National Museum of Ireland stating that the Minister requires a panel of four pursuant to section 19 of the Act and to ask the museum to nominate a further nominee, at least one other female, to be considered for appointment. A letter was issued to the director seeking an additional nomination on 23 May 2018. We sent a reminder to the National Museum of Ireland in respect of this matter and the final form was sent to me and was signed today. The issue was resolved. The revised form was sent back on 4 May. That is where we are at the moment and hopefully we will have this sorted out in the next few weeks.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Question No. 18 is next.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It was already dealt with.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It is identical to Question No. 1.

Question No. 18 replied to with Written Answers.

Waterways Ireland Funding

19. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the funding that will be provided to Waterways Ireland to maintain and enhance canals as a tourist amenity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26712/18]

Deputy Joan Burton: This is to ask the Minister what her proposals are in respect of the funding to be provided to Waterways Ireland. There are a number of very important canals in the country, not least the canals on the north side and south side of Dublin. Other canals pass through very touristic country and through urban areas. They are very popular with local peo-

ple and visitors. Waterways Ireland has been struggling in terms of the funding allocated by the Department. I would like to know what the Minister's proposals are and when that funding will start to become available. Waterways Ireland is a North-South body, as the Minister is aware.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Waterways Ireland is responsible for the management, maintenance, development and restoration of some 1,000 km of navigable inland waterways, principally for recreational purposes. It has responsibility for the Shannon-Erne Waterway, the Shannon Navigation, the Barrow Navigation, the Grand and Royal canals - which latter runs through the Deputy's constituency - the Erne System and the Lower Bann Navigation. This is a significant recreational resource and Waterways Ireland has been proactive in the development of blueways and greenways as a means to attract new visitors and in response to the growth of recreational activities such as walking, canoeing and cycling.

The amount of funding allocated to Waterways Ireland from my Department's Vote in 2018 is €24.106 million to undertake its statutory functions across its entire network. Recently I announced that a further section of the Ulster Canal would be developed, in addition to the section currently nearing completion from Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson. Waterways Ireland is actively involved in the development of the towpaths along the canals to provide off-road, safe amenities for walkers and cyclists. Waterways Ireland has worked with local authorities, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Fáilte Ireland and other partners to upgrade the Royal Canal towpath as part of the Dublin-Galway cycle route and it is hoped that this route will be largely completed, and indeed extended to the Shannon River, by the end of this year. There is continued development of the Grand Canal towpath and the Barrow towpath as important off-road links to open up southern and western Ireland to tourists. Waterways Ireland is also at the forefront of developing blueways along the canals network. They offer opportunities for locals and tourists to enjoy outdoor recreational activities on and beside the water in a comfortable, safe environment. Infrastructure is in place and plans are under way to have an operational blueway in place along the Royal Canal at Mullingar for summer 2018.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Acting Chairman, Deputy Durkan, probably has an interest in the Royal Canal as well. Has any work been done in respect of design for a proper footpath in the area called the deep cutting, which runs from Castleknock and Blanchardstown up to Clonsilla? It is a very deep and dangerous section of the canal. The Department has been considering this in conjunction with Waterways Ireland for many years. It is in an area with a population of more than 100,000. It is a very important amenity for the area. Until recently, the Taoiseach was a frequent jogger along the path. This cutting is so deep and the footpath so high and narrow that it is very difficult for more than two or three people to walk abreast. It is quite a difficulty. Somebody using a wheelchair would probably find this section of the canal, which is lengthy enough, extremely difficult to go along. Has the Minister made any progress in this regard?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: My understanding is that it is called the deep sinking but I will bow to the Deputy's knowledge of the area. It is part of the Royal Canal between Castleknock and Clonsilla, starting just after the 12th lock and continuing for about 4 km west of Clonsilla station. It is very narrow in places, making it difficult for boats to pass each other. At its deepest, the towpath is carried some 9 m above the water and in places it is only 1 m wide or less, making it difficult to develop. Waterways Ireland along with Fingal County Council and the National Transport Authority is exploring design options to integrate the development of the towpath along the deep sinking into the overall development of a multi-use trackway as part of the Royal Canal greenway, the national cycling network route from Dublin to Galway. Water-

ways Ireland is also carrying out work on the Royal Canal towpath in conjunction with local authorities. The overall funding for this work will not come from the Waterways Ireland budget but from other agencies such as the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. Waterways Ireland initially funds the work and then recoups the majority of the cost from the various agencies. At this point in the year, it is anticipated that the net spend by Waterways Ireland following this recoupment will be negligible.

Deputy Joan Burton: Will the proposals be put on public view? This part of the canal, which the Minister described correctly, is quite extensive in length. It is an area of enormous natural beauty with a very large bird and wildlife population. It is really important that whatever design is drawn up, given the particular difficulties of the height of the towpath above the canal, it is subject to a proper environmental assessment in terms of protecting the natural environment of the canal at that point. I certainly hope there will be more consultation than there has been with many residents of those areas of the Barrow waterway who have had various proposals that would interfere with the peace of the area.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I think there should be consultation. Following completion of each section of the Royal Canal towpath, Waterways Ireland will enter into service-level agreements with the local authorities with regard to the upkeep and ongoing maintenance of the towpaths and greenways. The potential running costs for Waterways Ireland have yet to be determined but will be monitored as discussions advance. Due to the drier weather, we are experiencing lower than normal levels of water in some areas of the Royal Canal. Waterways Ireland is managing individual passages at the summit level on a one-to-one basis. This is being monitored and a marine notice will issue on this if it is necessary. It is important that the blueways are used for tourists - not just for tourists but also for residents living in the area, as the Deputy correctly pointed out, so that they can avail of their canal from a recreational perspective.

Questions Nos. 20 to 23, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

Forbairt na nOileán

24. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta cé mhéad airgead atá ceadaithe aici i mbliana do mhion-oibreacha caipitil ar na hoileáin; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [26704/18]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Ní thógfaidh sé seo ach dhá soicind. Cé mhéad airgead atá ceadaithe ag an Aire Stáit le haghaidh mionoibreacha ar na hoileáin?

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Joe McHugh): Tugann mo Roinn cuireadh bliantúil do chomhairlí chontae a bhfuil oileáin faoina gcúram iarratas a chur chuici ar chomh-mhaoiniú do thograí mionoibreacha ar na hoileáin úd. Níos túisce i mbliana, rinne mo Roinn amhlaidh d'fhonn clár a cheadú do 2018. Tá na hiarratais á cuireadh chuici á meas ag mo Roinn faoi láthair. Is buiséad caipitil de €1.344 milliún san iomlán atá ar fáil don Roinn i mbliana do thograí oileán. Nuair a chuirtear maoiniú do mhórtogra forbairt Ché Inis Oírr san áireamh, meastar go mbeidh thart ar €1 mhilliún ar fáil le cur i dtreo mionoibreacha i mbliana.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): That concludes Question Time.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Cén uair a fhógrófar iad?

Deputy Joe McHugh: Tá said faoi chúram mo Roinne faoi láthair.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Tá an t-am istigh.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Tá na meastúcháin ag bogadh ar aghaidh. Tá mé ag smaoineamh go mbeidh an obair déanta roimh dheireadh na bliana, ach beidh oibreacha áirithe déanta roimhe sin. Tá brón orm cur isteach ar an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach ach ba mhaith liom a rá maidir leis an bpleanáil teanga taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht go bhfuil na hullmhúcháin ceadaithe ach níl na pleananna ceadaithe.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Topical Issue Debate

School Funding

Deputy Sean Fleming: I am pleased that the Minister for Education and Skills is here in person to take this Topical Issue, which concerns the shortfall in the school capitation grant for primary schools. The Minister is very aware of the situation. The capitation grant used to be €200 and was cut to €170 some time ago leaving a very serious shortfall in the funding for our primary schools throughout the country. With the increased expenditure in the past couple of years, one would have expected that there would have been some move to restore it to the previous level. It is very disappointing that there has been no such improvement in the two budgets to date despite a commitment that this would happen in the programme for Government.

As we all know, there are over 500,000 children in more than 3,000 primary schools around the country. I do not think there is any match between the capitation grant and the cost of running the school. It has resulted in schools having to provide in the order of €50 million through fundraising and other efforts just to keep the school open in terms of light, heat, electricity and insurance and to make it a safe place for the students to learn in and for teachers to teach in. Many people have contacted us about this issue. I believe that in the forthcoming budget, the Minister must start a process of restoring this grant as much as possible as quickly as possible. I will deal with other issues relevant to primary education such as class sizes, leadership, the situation of teaching principals, teacher supply panels and above all, ending the pay inequality that is still rampant in the primary school sector during my second opportunity to speak. My primary issue is to raise capitation grants for small schools with the Minister. It is more severe in small schools where the cost of keeping the building up and running to a safe standard is an enormous burden at local level. I ask the Minister to address this by way of a significant increase in the forthcoming budget.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I also want to raise the issue of the capitation grant. The cut in this grant is having a severe impact on schools. The amount was €200 and, if memory serves, it was

cut in 2008 and now stands at €170 per pupil. This has cost schools an estimated €105 million per annum and has left parents to engage in fundraising. Last year, the figure raised by parents through raffles, cake sales and race nights was €46 million. It is not sustainable in the long term. Parents are also making a contribution for basic items, which is putting huge pressure on them, particularly on low and middle-income families. These contributions come on top of paying for uniforms, books, tablets and extracurricular activities. Boards of management tell us that they are struggling to keep heat going and lights on. Earlier this week, Deputy Fleming, the Minister for Justice and Equality and I met with representatives of the boards of management of Catholic schools. Today, we met with the INTO. Both bodies outlined graphically to us the pressures they are under financially. The INTO has calculated that a €20 increase in the capitation grant per head per annum bringing the capitation grant to €190 would cost €12 million. That would have been a huge sum of money at one time and I know money must be found somewhere for everything but it is not a massive sum of money in terms of the budget in today's money. The public finances are in better shape. I ask the Government to look at that this year. I will discuss the minor works grant and class sizes during the second part of my contribution but could the Minister address specifically the issue of the capitation?

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue and for their interest in the education area. Reading between the lines of what they have said, they can understand the difficulties I am facing. They mentioned pay restoration, time off for principals, investment in leadership, minor works and smaller class sizes. These are all needs I would like to be able to address. This year, I had €550 million across all education budgets. Half of that money - €240 million - went on pay restoration so that was the first thing. That was partly contributing to the restoration of pay for new entrants and, of course, the general increases in pay. I paid out the minor works grant last year. That comes to €5,000 for every school plus €18 per head on top of that.

There is no doubt that starting to put money back into capitation grants is something I have the ambition to do but I must set priorities. To be honest, the priorities I set were reducing class sizes, providing 1,500 additional teachers for children with special educational needs and starting the investment in school leadership. I have made a significant investment. A total of 1,000 principals this year will get support. I have also made provision this year for more time off for those principals in smaller schools. Depending on the size of the school, I have added between two and four days extra time off to allow those principals time to plan. In addition, there will be 50 clusters where schools can combine to employ one person who would be available to avoid the problem of finding substitution by those principals. That would be relevant, particularly in areas with a more dispersed population. Capitation is in two parts currently. There is €170 per pupil, plus a further ancillary payment of €153 per pupil. The ancillary payment has gone up by €16, which reflects salary increases in arbitration awards, but the overall base amount has not gone up. I have also made other changes designed to help schools to better manage their resources. For example, the schools procurement unit has saved some €2 million per year across all schools in each of the last three years. Total capitation payments to primary schools amount to some €205 million and the payment is making a significant contribution to addressing costs.

I have dealt with the issue of voluntary contributions. It is important to point out that such contributions must be voluntary and that there cannot be compulsion to pay for mainstream activities.

I believe the Deputies appreciate that we are recovering from a difficult time. I have to make choices and believe most Deputies would defend the choices I made to reduce class sizes

in primary schools, start the process of restoring pay for newly qualified entrants and make particular provision for children with special needs, a measure which has involved nearly 3,000 additional SNAs. Overall, over 6,000 additional teachers have been provided and supported in the last couple of years. Moreover, we are seeking to meet these needs at a time when there is a rapidly growing school population.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Minister for his presence and constructive approach to this issue. I know that we have thrown a myriad of demands at him and that they cannot all be met in one budget. With regard to capitation grants, the Minister replied to a parliamentary question I asked last week by stating it was difficult to make precise comparisons between the levels of grants and the actual cost of running schools at primary and secondary level. Therefore, there is an indication that everyone within the system knows that the capitation grant does not meet the cost of running a school.

I mentioned the pupil-teacher ratio. We pushed the issue last year and, with our support, a reduction from 26 to 25 was achieved. The INTO told us earlier today that in the next five or six years there might be up to 50,000 fewer pupils in primary schools. Therefore, the Government might be able to make progress on the the issue of the pupil-teacher ratio without any significant increase in cost.

Boards of management are looking for the capitation grant to be restored, as well as the minor works grant. They are very reasonable in what they say to us in that they want a guaranteed but phased programme. While we all know that it will not happen in one budget, we want the Minister to take some steps along the road on this occasion and give a commitment to follow through.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister for his reply. I note that some progress has been made and we welcome the reduction of one in the average class size, although in our budget submission we proposed a reduction of two. We have the second highest class sizes in the European Union, at an average of 25, with the European Union as a whole having an average class size of 20; therefore, there is more work to do. I also understand everything cannot be done in one year, but the capitation grant needs to cover the cost of running a school. We need to go further in that regard. While I do not expect the Minister to announce the budget today and know that he has to make the argument at the Cabinet table, I urge him to make it again this year and go a step further in providing for a reduction in class sizes. It is a work in progress and we need to push on. The Minister should also have another look at the minor works grants to see what could be done in that regard. I ask that the first two areas - capitation payments and class sizes - be prioritised. It would be very welcome to build on the progress which has been made.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I am sympathetic to what the Deputies are saying. The one thing I would say in this debate about what we should do in education is that we need to focus on outcomes for children. The debate in this House too often is about pupil-teacher ratios and capitation grants, which are all about outputs. One of the things I am proud to stand over is that, in the teeth of what was probably the worst recession the country had ever seen, we increased the number of ASD units from 540 to 1,304, or by an 750 additional. The units have transformed opportunities for children and we are now seeing the highest ever proportion of children stay on in school to complete their education. Ten year olds are best at reading and mathematics. The reason this is the case is that we invested specifically in supporting literacy initiatives, reforming the curriculum and supporting teachers with both leadership and, as they call it, CPD, or

continuous professional development courses in order that they could make an impact in the classroom. We have put money into SNAs which has seen children progress in education who in the past were overlooked. We need to talk about the impact on children's lives, as well as the ratios about which people tend to talk. While we are doing well in all of these areas, we need to do better. I am keen to see money going into innovation, supporting clusters, looking at DEIS schools and how we can do better in achieving better outcomes, as well as closing the literacy gap between a DEIS and a non-DEIS school. We need to think more imaginatively, rather than always just looking at the crude input per head measures and instead focus on how we can make a real impact in the success of a child. That is why it is more complicated than just spreading the money thinly across the system. We are trying to make a difference with some of the interventions we are choosing to make.

Climate Change Policy

Deputy Joan Burton: I hope the Government was as shocked as most citizens at the report the other day on how different countries in the European Union were performing in meeting their climate change obligations. We are rightly fond of stressing how well Ireland does in many international assessments, given the difficulties we have come through in the past ten years, but the report was a kick in the pants for a Government and a Department supposedly dealing with climate change. However, they are all talk and almost no action. In fact, I was amazed to see the Taoiseach and four or five Cabinet Ministers who perhaps included the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, although I am not sure how many attended, launch yet another report on climate change the other day. The report about which I am talking placed us second last in the European Union after Poland. As the House probably knows, Poland has a Government that is climate sceptical and also produces a lot of coal. That we should rank second last in the European Union is a real shame. More importantly, it is a shame in the context of future growth opportunities in Ireland. Unless we have a Government and Department policy that really goes after climate change, we will not improve. In that respect, while I have no objection to the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, answering this question, I am extremely disappointed that the Minister, Deputy Denis Naughten, who was in the House only a couple of hours ago has failed to show up. With all due respect, I do not believe the Minister of State works in his Department or has a function in it. I can understand her helping out a colleague and I have no objection to her at all, but the Minister is just funking out of coming into the Dáil to speak about how badly we are doing on climate change. Because it affects us all and the planet, I would have expected more from the Government and the person responsible for climate change policy in government, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before the Minister of State responds, what we have been trying to do on Topical Issues is reach a situation where, when a Member has a matter selected, the Minister responsible will come into the House to address it. Where the Minister is not available, he or she should communicate with the Member and suggest an alternative occasion on which he or she would be available. It is regrettable if that is not happening. The Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, is welcome to the House as always.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I only received word that I was to take the Topical Issue a while back.

Deputy Joan Burton: I appreciate that and thank the Minister of State for coming to the

House. I have no issue with her.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I acknowledge that but to clarify, we contacted the Deputy's office to leave a message that I would take the matter. We said that if she wanted to make a change with the Ceann Comhairle, that would be fine by us. I will read the statement and then perhaps discuss the other matters Deputy Burton has raised. By the way, I was not at the launch.

I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Yesterday, the Taoiseach, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment and other members of the Government launched the climate action priority element of Project Ireland 2040. The funding commitments in the national development plan will see a major step change in the funding available for climate action over the next decade. Almost €22 billion is to be directed to addressing the transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient society through a combination of Exchequer and semi-State investments. The national development plan also allocated a further €8.6 billion for investments in sustainable mobility. This means that well over €1 in €5 spent under the national development plan will be on climate action. This capital investment will enable us to deliver a significant reduction in our greenhouse gas emissions over the period to 2030.

Building on the existing measures to reduce our emissions set out in the national mitigation plan published last July, key investment priorities in the national development plan for climate action include transitioning Moneypoint away from coal by the middle of the next decade; energy efficiency upgrades of 45,000 homes per year from 2021; support for a major roll-out of heat pump technologies; delivering energy upgrades to BER "B" level to all public buildings and a minimum of one third of commercial buildings; implementing the new renewable electricity support scheme to deliver an additional 3,000 MW to 4,500 MW of renewable energy with an initial focus on shovel-ready projects, which could contribute to our 2020 targets; roll-out of the support scheme for renewable heat and national smart metering; at least 500,000 electric vehicles on the road by 2030 with additional charging infrastructure to cater for planned growth and a €5 million climate action fund, which the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment announced last month, to leverage investment by public and private bodies in climate action measures.

The Government recognises that expenditure alone is neither affordable nor sufficient to meet the scale of the climate challenge ahead and that we need a targeted balance between Government and private expenditure, taxation, regulation and behavioural change. New regulatory commitments in the national development plan include a commitment to no new non-zero emission cars to be sold in Ireland post 2030, with no NCT certificates to be issued for non-zero emission cars post 2045. This is one of the most ambitious commitments on zero emissions on passenger vehicles in the EU. There is a further commitment to a transition to a low emission urban bus fleet, including electric buses, with no diesel-only buses purchased from 1 July 2019. Further consideration will be given to climate-focused taxation measures in the context of budget 2019.

The Government is a strong supporter of the Paris Agreement and its objectives. Ireland is also committed to the EU commitment under the Paris Agreement to achieve at least a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 1990 levels relative to 2030.

Deputy Joan Burton: The most important Government commitment, not only since the appointment of the current Taoiseach but over the course of its lifetime, was to set up the strategic

communications unit. This quasi-press release from the Minister, Deputy Naughten, is not an answer to a parliamentary question. It tells us about all the great things that will be done, commencing in five and seven years' time. Very little of what is here explains how we will move from second last place with a rating of 22% compliance with the Paris Agreement, which we signed up to as a country. We are all in favour of the agreement. That is great. We all debated it and signed up years ago. The evidence of the Climate Action Network, CAN, report, however, is that we are second last in Europe in respect of the agreement. In our daily lives and in our constituencies, we are all becoming increasingly familiar with yellow and red storm warnings, snow storms and other unusual and extreme weather events. While Ireland is small, it is subject as an island to the full forces of the Atlantic and the Irish Sea. We do not have to be scientists to see that extreme weather events are becoming relatively more frequent with consequent enormous costs. I feel sorry for the Minister of State who had to read out what is basically a PR statement. The publicity event was straight out of the strategic communications unit. This issue is far too serious to be dealt with as a publicity stunt.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I appreciate what Deputy Burton has said and her knowledge and passion on this subject. I am given a task to do. While the Deputy may not be happy with the reply, the issues she has raised have been noted and I will go back to the Minister on them. I will read part of the follow-up material in reply.

The Government does not accept the assessment in the CAN Europe publication of 18 June ranking member states on climate ambition and progress against targets. The report's conclusions do not reflect Ireland's ambitions on climate action, our commitment to the Paris arrangement, our very ambitious domestic 2050 objectives or our support for the EU 2030 targets. There are difficult days and challenges ahead and we are playing catch-up as a country on our climate change obligations. This is as much an opportunity as an obligation. In any event, it is a moral necessity and a vital national interest. Addressing climate change and our climate targets to 2030 and beyond is at the top of the Government's policy agenda. I was not at the launch of the climate change report yesterday but I assure the Deputy that I understand fully that she may not be happy with the reply. I only have what is in front of me. As my knowledge is not as clear as hers, I will bring what she said back to the Minister. While I am grateful to be allowed to take this matter, I stress that Deputies should be informed when a Topical Issue is to be taken by a Minister of State who might not be able to answer some of the questions that are put.

6 o'clock

Cross-Border Health Services Provision

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: The Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, is very welcome. I appreciate, as always, her courtesy in attending. Time and again, she is the person who has to come to the House to deal with health issues. While I appreciate that she is a Minister of State within the Department of Health, it should be the senior Minister who takes these issues. It is regrettable that he does not.

I raise the matter of the 511,904 people on outpatient waiting lists.

This is the highest number on record, which is a national disgrace. Of that number, 79,647 have been on the waiting list for more than 18 months. Three years ago, the then Minister for Health - the current Taoiseach - stated that by 2018 nobody would wait for more than 18 months for a procedure. Despite this, the waiting lists are at an all-time high.

The cross-border directive was introduced by the European Parliament to better define the rights of EU citizens when seeking treatment in member states other than their own. Under the directive, Irish residents have the right to avail of medical treatment in any other country in the European Economic Area, EEA, and to be treated on the same basis as they would be treated here. Provided certain criteria are met, EEA residents are entitled to request the treatment and receive reimbursement of the cost.

All Deputies are contacted daily or weekly by constituents who are enduring difficulties that impact on their quality of life. Since I became aware of the directive, I have been advising patients on long waiting lists in my constituency of Kildare to avail of it to access care. Cataract removals, tonsillectomies and joint replacements are the treatments I encounter most frequently. One gentleman, who had been unable to work for three years while waiting for a hip operation, recently thanked my office for pointing him in the right direction. The five-star treatment he received abroad changed his life. It is ridiculous that the Health Service Executive cannot have operations performed here but can pay for them to be done abroad. Given the record number of people on waiting lists, should more people not be encouraged to travel abroad to obtain treatments that cannot be provided in the Irish health system?

The cross-border directive is not advertised well enough. While it is advertised on the Internet, every primary care centre and general practice should have information on the directive because many older people who could avail of it are not Internet savvy and will not be aware of it. None of the people I informed about the directive was aware of it previously. Given our scandalous waiting lists, we should point people in the right direction and help them improve their quality of life.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I apologise on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, who cannot attend today. The Minister responded to several Topical Issue matters, including one on cervical cancer, during the week. I do not know where he is but in any case I will respond and the Deputy may contact the Minister's office to relay her concerns about his absence.

I have done exactly what Deputy O'Loughlin suggested in that I have asked general practitioners in my primary care area to ensure information on travelling abroad for treatment is made available to patients. The majority of them indicated they do this in any case.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The vast majority of EU patients receive health-care in their home country and prefer to do so for many reasons, such as language differences, culture, family support, distance of travel to other countries and, importantly, familiarity with the medical culture of their home state. However, for Irish patients seeking access to health services in another EU-EEA country, the cross-border directive introduced in 2014 has proved to be an important scheme. The Health Service Executive operates the directive in Ireland and, through the national contact point office, provides information for patients on the directive on its website and by telephone, email and post.

The numbers availing of the directive continue to increase since its introduction. According to the latest information from the HSE, 1,422 applications have been processed under the directive so far this year. In 2015, 2016 and 2017, the number of Irish people treated under the directive were 164, 793 and 2,011, respectively. Patients are primarily availing of orthopaedic, ophthalmology and orthodontic services under the scheme, with the majority of these treatments being carried out in Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK.

Noting that the directive states that its implementation should not result in patients being encouraged to receive treatment outside their member state and recognising that any decision to avail of treatment, at home or abroad, is a matter for a patient in consultation with his or her health professional, the HSE has sought to educate health professionals about the directive. Specifically, the HSE has met general practitioner organisations, such as the Irish College of General Practitioners, ICGP, and GP practices as it recognises that general practitioners are on the front line with regard to providing information and referrals to patients on their treatment options, both at home and abroad. Under the directive, general practitioners as well as consultants can refer a patient for overseas treatment.

In addition, the HSE has met and communicated with other professional bodies and organisations, including the Independent Hospital Association of Ireland and various voluntary hospitals and hospital groups, to inform them of how patients can access healthcare under the terms of the directive. The HSE has also held various public meetings on the directive and continues to meet and is available to meet a range of groups regarding the directive.

In summary, the number of people availing of the directive continues to increase, which points to an increased awareness of the directive by both healthcare professionals and the wider general public. In recognition that the decision to seek treatment overseas is one for the patient, in conjunction with his or her health professional, the Health Service Executive plans to continue to engage with healthcare professionals and professional bodies to provide them with information on the operation of the directive.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I completely agree that the vast majority of EU patients prefer to receive healthcare in their own country for the reasons the Minister of State outlined. It is, therefore, a shocking indictment of the Irish health system that 1,422 applications have been processed under the directive to date in 2018 and it is only 21 June. This figure shows the dire state of the health service.

The cost incurred by the Health Service Executive under the directive to date in 2018 is €2.79 million. Since the directive came into force in October 2014, the HSE has incurred costs of €9.247 million under the directive. As such, almost €10 million has been spent reimbursing the costs of 4,615 procedures. Would this money not be better spent on improving our health system? When people who genuinely need to have procedures done have to travel abroad we still end up paying the costs. It would be far better to invest in improving the health system.

On the issue of doctors referring patients for cross-border services, while I have come across doctors who are aware of the directive, from what I hear, they have no further contact with their patients once they have been referred for treatment abroad. From speaking to constituents, there appears to be a lack of communication between consultants and patients on health services in other countries and following treatment abroad. We are in a catch-22 in that the Government must either commit to providing the healthcare services required in this country or, alternatively, it must actively promote the cross-border directive while we wait for services to be provided here.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I have no argument with the Deputy. We all want what is best for the patient. In light of the concerns the Deputy has raised and the fact that when people are informed by their GP or other professional and they go to a consultant in the hospital, somewhere along the way the message may get lost that there is another way forward. I do not have the specific answer on why the consultants and surgeons are not able to cope with the numbers

that need operations and assessments. I do not have anything further to add but I will relay the Deputy's concerns to the Minister and hopefully over the next week he will be able to give the Deputy some insight into why so many people have decided to go abroad because of the lack of theatre space or surgeons to perform the operations in our own country. I will ask the Minister to reply directly to the Deputy.

Homeless Accommodation Provision

Deputy Dessie Ellis: As the Minister of State, Deputy English, knows, we have a major housing crisis with almost 9,652 men, women and children homeless, of whom 3,689 are children. These figures exclude the contentious number of people who have been removed from the homeless list. Latest figures also show that there are 763 families in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation. Some of these families have had to resort to self accommodating, that is, ringing around hotels to secure a booking. This is extremely difficult and very stressful as the Minister of State can imagine, especially in the case of families. Hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation are often booked on a daily basis, leaving families in a terrible and uncertain situation, sometimes having to travel long distances, if they can even afford it, at the last minute to secure beds for the night. Most families and individuals who are homeless with Dublin City Council are now spending up to three or four years homeless waiting on council accommodation or sometimes less if the housing assistance payment, HAP, can be secured.

Every time major events take place in Dublin we have a crisis in accommodation with some hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation opting to take in clients at the expense of homeless families even though they have nowhere to go. This human tragedy is repeated year in year out and will become even more obvious when over the weekend of 25 and 26 August, Pope Francis will visit Ireland. He will visit the Phoenix Park and Croke Park in particular. With the expected crowds and the peak season for tourists, accommodation will be impossible to get and more often than not the prices will be inflated by some establishments taking advantage of the occasion. We have already experienced that in the past. Once again this leaves us with a human tragedy in the making and a major crisis for those homeless families.

Does the Minister of State have an estimate as to how many families could potentially be displaced over the weekend? If action is not taken we will have more families sleeping rough in cars, couch-surfing or sleeping in any nook or cranny they can find. What contingency plans has the Minister of State put in place? Does he intend on putting a crisis management team together? Where are the facilities or accommodation to be had considering that we have 763 families dependent on this type of accommodation at present? The Minister of State cannot leave this until the last minute. The families and their children need certainty. Can the Minister of State guarantee them security and a safe and decent place to stay during that weekend because we have not seen that up to now? We have experienced when there are major events such as concerts that a lot of people get displaced. I also believe that hotels putting up prices on these occasions is something that should not happen because some of the prices that we have seen are crazy and as a result some people are made homeless. Some hotels want to get people out and bring in tourists so they can jack up prices.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I thank Deputy Ellis for raising this issue and giving me a chance on my behalf, on behalf of the Department and on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Planning

and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, to outline the position on this because it is a story that has been discussed over recent days.

Addressing homelessness is an absolute priority for this Government. Rebuilding Ireland, the Government's action plan on housing and homelessness is a six year plan to increase the supply of housing significantly, particularly in terms of social housing. The plan also includes a range of measures to address homelessness and my Department is working proactively to deliver on these measures. Last year alone saw more than 26,000 additional households having their social housing need met, utilising a budget of €1.4 billion. In order to build on this progress and to meet the needs of further additional households, the budget has increased by 36% to €1.9 billion this year. We are also making progress in exiting households from homelessness. In 2017, 4,729 individuals exited homelessness into an independent tenancy. While the numbers coming out are positive, we accept that there are still far too many living in emergency accommodation, bed and breakfast accommodation and hotels. It is far too high and no one is trying to say otherwise. It is more than 9,500 as the Deputy said. Progress is being made but it is not enough and the Minister and I acknowledge and accept that but we did see 2,080 households leave emergency accommodation in hotels last year, with the majority of these households exiting into homes, rather than hubs. There is some movement through the system but there are still far too many people there. It is correct to say that there are more than 9,500 in emergency accommodation. To be honest, it is probably not true to say that they are all there for three or four years, but I will not argue over that. The majority are getting through the system. There are some cases that are there a long time but the majority are not and in some cases people might be in a hotel or emergency accommodation for three to six months and then find a home. Others are there for longer but it is not the case that all of these people are there for three or four years because 2,000 families have left hotels. It is also true that many families are offered other solutions, not always a permanent house or social housing but they are offered HAP or other rental assistance - some take it up and some do not for whatever reasons. It might not always suit them but very often people are offered that solution.

Rebuilding Ireland is working and everything is on target and all of the trends are correct in terms of the supply of housing coming in, for example an additional 7,000 social houses became available last year through all the different methods and they are in use. There will be more than 8,000 houses this year. Unfortunately, there are continuing presentations to homeless services in the Dublin region on top of that. That means that we still have far too many families in emergency accommodation. As a consequence, we still have a reliance on hotels to provide additional accommodation for families until we can increase the availability of longer term solutions. Additional supply will help to solve that and that is the way to do it.

Pope Francis will be making the first Papal visit to Ireland in almost 40 years on 25 and 26 August and the visit is expected to put additional strain on the availability of hotels across the Dublin region around this time, which happens during many other events as well. It is not just because of the Pope's visit, it would happen with seasonal events and in August because of the tourist season anyway. The Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, closely monitors the demand for emergency accommodation and has contingency plans in place that provide additional bed capacity when required. Such plans were successfully activated, for example, during Storm Ophelia and Storm Emma and more recently during the series of concerts in the Phoenix Park, which placed demands on accommodation across the city because other events also increase the demand and it is not just the Papal visit. The DRHE actively pursues all accommodation options, which may include providing accommodation in neighbouring counties

to ensure that families are provided with emergency accommodation when needed which is as appropriate as possible to their needs. We accept that it is not ideal to have to go to a neighbouring county. We always try to find solutions in the county in question.

Currently the DRHE has 41 family units available in Dublin city which are used on a one night only basis should any family be unable to access accommodation. The Deputy asked what new measures we are taking. A further 30 contingency units will be in place by the end of this month, located centrally so that those who make use of them have easy access to transport options to attend schools, work and other facilities. In addition, two new family hubs, which will provide additional capacity, have recently opened in the Dublin region. My Department will continue to support the DRHE with resources and funding will not be an issue.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I accept that there are occasions when there are events and people end up homeless. This special occasion, however, will bring hundreds of thousands of people into Dublin. Its impact will be exceptional. While the Minister of State says he has 30 extra beds and a few extra hubs that will not be sufficient if several hundred people will be put out of hotels. We have to have a real plan that says we need to have not just a small amount of accommodation. These are families with young children. This affects children's safety and well-being. We have seen what Tusla has said about the fact that children are in hotels. That has been an indictment of the system.

The Minister of State said there will be extra accommodation available in the hubs but I do not know where. I have spoken to many of them and they are at capacity. I have told the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government that in Hampton Wood 130 units are coming on stream for the housing assistance payment, HAP. They have been bought by a crowd called Irish Residential Properties, Ires, which has bought hundreds of units around the country. The Government should be buying up many of these units and not allowing vulture funds or pension funds or other crowds like that to buy them. It makes more economic sense for the State to get them and use them for social housing.

Deputy Damien English: The Government recognises that hotels are not a suitable accommodation option for families. That is why we are supporting local authorities to develop family hubs and new housing projects, and to purchase vacant houses from banks or others. Last year an additional 7,000 houses were in the system and this year there will be an additional 8,000 available for social housing. That is a combination of direct build, Part V, vacant houses that we buy through the agencies from the banks, as the Deputy says, and other properties that we source. That is in addition to properties we rent and have on long-term leases. Many houses are coming in. They will become available on a monthly and weekly basis and will be used to house people who are homeless and are on the housing waiting list too in order of priority. They come on stream every week and month and will help us reduce the numbers in hotels too. Family hubs also offer family living arrangements with a greater level of stability than is possible in hotel accommodation with the capacity to provide appropriate play space, cooking and laundry facilities and communal recreational space while move-on options for long-term independent living are identified and secured. There are now more than 20 family hubs in place nationally providing accommodation for more than 500 families, including 19 in the Dublin region. This includes a family hub which opened in the Coolock area of Dublin this month. The Department will work closely with the Dublin local authorities to ensure that further family hubs are developed to reduce the reliance on hotels as a form of emergency accommodation. Moving families to homes is the ultimate goal but hubs offer a better form of emergency accommodation in the short term. I think the Deputy agrees on that point but they are not a permanent solution.

Earlier this year we saw higher than expected increases in family homelessness in the Dublin region. In response to this the Minister requested that the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, prepare a report on issues impacting on homelessness in the Dublin region. The Minister received the report this week and a report from the inter-agency group on homelessness was submitted to him last week. The Department will review this and will take appropriate actions too. The difficulties that might arise at peak seasons or when there are events concern new presentations. They do not and will not affect existing families in hotels. We do have contingency plans for every night of the week if someone presents. That is why I said there is no reason for anybody to have to be accommodated in a Garda station or anywhere else like that. There are contingency plans in place for every night of the week for weather events such as storms and for concerts or other major events such as the papal visit. We have plans in place. We will certainly make sure they are increased in August which is a busy period anyway but they are for new presentations. They are not for people cleared out of hotels. That is not the case. They are for people who are not already in the system. I stress that we have many new accommodation solutions coming on stream weekly and they will bring the numbers down. Last year 26,000 families were helped. That does not mean that everybody gets the help they need. I accept that but if we can increase the pace as we are doing with new supply it will help provide solutions in the form of permanent homes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sure that all of us here appreciate that Pope Francis I is the last man on earth who would want to see vulnerable people driven out of their emergency accommodation.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I am not accusing the Minister of that.

Deputy Damien English: That is not going to happen.

Consumer Protection (Amendment) Bill 2017: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Niall Collins: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second time."

I am very pleased that the Consumer Protection (Amendment) Bill 2017 is being discussed today on Second Stage under Private Members' business. This Bill will greatly enhance consumer protections and rights in the unregulated area of the sale of gift vouchers and their terms and conditions, and enhance transparency in this regard. It is another pro-consumer initiative on which my party has been campaigning. This approach to bringing forward legislative proposals will ensure that Irish consumers can select a gift card or voucher at their own discretion and have full access to the terms and conditions of the product they are buying. They will also have the certainty that the product they are buying will last for a certain period.

Gift cards which are e-money products are subject to regulation and protection under the EU electronic money directive, the EU anti-money laundering laws and the payments services directives. However, other gift vouchers and cards remain unregulated in the main in Ireland with approximately two thirds of the market being completely unregulated. The unregulated sector concerns mainly shopping centre cards and single brand store cards. Furthermore, there is no protection of the funds loaded onto these cards. Retailers use such funds as normal working capital and if a retailer collapses the funds are lost to consumers.

Finally, there is no consumer protection legislation for these unregulated gift vouchers and

cards in respect of expiry dates, mandatory requirements on transparency, security of funds or indeed the fees charged. This is a matter of concern during a peak shopping period. Christmas is one of the busiest times of year for the sale of gift vouchers, however, consumers receiving the gift vouchers can often be left unaware of the terms and conditions that apply to them, specifically, the period during which vouchers remain valid can vary. As a result consumers are often left shortchanged when they go to redeem them. Some retailers are more flexible than others but they have the right to refuse to honour the voucher outside the defined period.

Over the past seven years successive Fine Gael-led Governments have failed to protect consumers by not acting on consumer protection legislation to regulate gift vouchers. This was acknowledged in the heads of a 2015 consumer rights Bill that has remained in limbo. They stated that the proposals in the chapter were the first legislative provisions to deal specifically with these products, gift vouchers. My Bill makes new provisions in regulating the sale of gift vouchers and the contracts for their supply by amending the Consumer Protection Act 2007. The Bill establishes a definition of gift vouchers which takes in all types of product, be they electronic, card, written, certificate or other. For the first time in Irish consumer law the Bill proposes that there be no expiry date on gift vouchers which is “not less than a period of five years”. In other words, all gift vouchers would remain valid for five years and the five-year expiry date has been deployed in other jurisdictions to good effect. Under this Bill an obligation is imposed on a trader to inform the consumer of any fees associated with the sale of the voucher before the consumer is bound by the gift voucher contract. Gift voucher contracts can provide for restrictions in their use.

The Bill will enhance consumer protections by providing that a consumer must be informed of any restriction associated with a gift voucher before being bound by any such contract.

Fianna Fáil is the first political party to move a Bill in this area on Second Stage and we encourage others who have published similar Bills to support the passage of our Bill in order to enable it to proceed to Committee Stage as quickly as possible when further scrutiny can take place. I acknowledge the work of the Social Democrats in this area and hope all parties in the Oireachtas can work together to progress the legislation on Committee Stage.

Successive Fine Gael-led Governments have sat on a 2015 Bill to regulate gift vouchers, citing EU legislation that is coming down the road that will have primacy over domestic legislation as a reason for not prioritising it. Last November when I raised the issue of the lack of movement on that Bill, the Minister of State, Deputy Pat Breen, stated: “I have to consider the advisability of bringing forward a legislative proposal to the Oireachtas when a directly related and fully harmonised legislative proposal may be at an advanced stage of the European Union legislative process.” In other words, the Government was not going to progress the Bill in the Dáil for the reasons stated at the time. Clearly, it was another example of old stroke politics, given that Fine Gael, through the Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys, did a complete U-turn and brought forward its own Bill only a few days after the Fianna Fáil Bill had been selected for discussion on Second Stage in Private Members’ time. I note that the Government is now using the line, “given the slower than expected progress of EU proposals”. It has been converted overnight to the cause of regulating gift vouchers. It is a cynical, if not gigantic, U-turn which showcases once more the fact that the Government does not care about the delivery of policy but rather prefers to copy the lead Opposition party in bringing forward progressive consumer protection measures after being asleep at the wheel on the issue for the past few years. Since the Government has been converted on the issue, I take it that it will now support the passage of our Bill and allow it to proceed to the next Stage. I urge it not to drag its heels in dealing with this

progressive consumer protection legislation and to do the honourable thing. I look forward to bringing the legislation through the Oireachtas as quickly as possible to ensure consumer rights will be protected and that there will be no nasty shocks or surprises for consumers or members of the public.

I refer to a statement issued by an organisation known as the Prepaid International Association. For the benefit of the House and those interested in the passage of this legislation, the Prepaid International Association is a global not-for-profit trade organisation that was established in 2007 to represent organisations involved in the supply of prepaid financial services and products. It acts as the principal point of liaison between the industry and Government agencies, regulators and consumer bodies. With respect to this Bill, its chairperson, Mr. Craig James, stated:

We welcome any moves by legislators that strengthen consumer confidence in prepaid products, including gift cards. The measures proposed address some of the key consumer concerns in this area and bring regulation to bear on the currently unregulated sector of the market such as store branded gift cards.

He went on to say the organisations the Prepaid International Association represented issued their products under the European Union e-money directive, which I referenced. I acknowledge that the regulated sector conducts its business in a highly regulated environment under the European Union e-money directive. Mr. James went on to say the directive went further than the proposed legislation - which is true - in that it offered security for consumer funds for products to operate in a fair and open manner through adherence to the treating customers fairly guidelines. As the sponsor of the Bill, I indicate that there is European Union legislation under which e-money product services operate in a highly regulated environment. The legislation I have outlined seeks to provide consumer protection in the two thirds of the market in this country which is highly unregulated.

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy John Halligan): I am happy to contribute to the debate on this Bill and commend Deputy Niall Collins for bringing it before the House. It is progressive legislation. Although it is not the subject of this debate, I also commend Deputies Catherine Murphy and Róisín Shortall for introducing their Private Members' Bill, the Consumer Rights (Gift Vouchers) Bill 2017.

The main provision of the Bill before the House is a ban on expiry dates of less than five years in gift voucher contracts. The Bill also contains provisions aimed at ensuring consumers will be informed of fees for, or restrictions on the use of, gift vouchers.

Surveys undertaken by the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission have found that half or more of consumers purchase gift vouchers. Many employers also purchase gift vouchers to reward employees. The Bill proposed by Deputy Niall Collins is, therefore, of interest and importance to a very large number of consumers and businesses. Its provision for a minimum term of five years addresses a key aspect of gift voucher contracts. Expiry dates on gift vouchers vary widely from six months to ten years, with the majority being valid for one to two years. In the retail sector expiry dates are typically two years from either the date of purchase or last use. In the travel and hospitality sectors an expiry date of just one year is extremely common.

Research undertaken for the then National Consumer Agency in 2013 found that almost half

of those surveyed had reported that they had had a gift voucher that had gone unused. In many cases - I am sure this applies to Deputies in the House also - people had found that they were unable to use a gift voucher because it had expired before they went to use it. This is a situation about which something can and should be done and one which is addressed by Deputy Niall Collins's Bill. Clearly it is wrong that, after an unreasonably short time, consumers should be deprived of the benefit of something for which they, or someone close to them, has paid.

The then Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, proposed in 2015 that expiry dates in gift voucher contracts be prohibited. This proposal formed part of the scheme of a comprehensive, consolidated consumer rights Bill. Owing to the publication of EU legislative proposals later that year which overlapped with two of the four main Parts of the Bill, its subsequent progress has been delayed, but I am glad to be able to say the relevant EU proposals are expected to be adopted in 2019 and that the Government intends to reactivate the Bill at the earliest possible date. In the meantime, the Minister has decided that legislation for the regulation of gift vouchers should not be delayed further. On 12 June the Government gave approval for the priority drafting of the unfair contract terms (gift vouchers) Bill. The proposed Government legislation provides that a trader shall not include in a gift voucher contract a term with an expiry date that is earlier than five years after the date of supply of the gift voucher. Importantly, it also gives the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation power to regulate fees for the issue or replacement of gift vouchers and the so-called dormancy fees that apply to inactive balances on certain gift vouchers after 12 months.

The public consultation process on the scheme of the consumer rights Bill produced a large number of responses on the gift voucher provisions. In particular, businesses that issued gift vouchers expressed concern that a complete ban on expiry dates would unreasonably expose them to indefinite liabilities and give rise to accounting difficulties. While a case can be made in principle that gift vouchers should be redeemable indefinitely, consumer law is about striking a fair balance between the rights given to consumers and the obligations placed on businesses. The Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys, has taken account of the concerns expressed by businesses and the scheme of the Bill approved by the Government provides, as does Deputy Niall Collins's Bill and that of Deputies Catherine Murphy and Róisín Shortall, that gift vouchers should be valid for a minimum term of five years. In the Minister's view, this strikes a reasonable balance between the right of consumers to get what they have paid for and the need of businesses for commercial certainty.

While I am in agreement with the aims of Deputy Niall Collins's Bill, there are a number of issues with the Bill. Expiry dates apart, the other main issue that consumers have with gift vouchers is the fees that apply to some vouchers after 12 months. These inactive balance or dormancy fees range from about €1.40 to €3 a month. This can mean, for example, that a gift voucher for €25 can be rendered worthless after just 20 months, in the same way as if it were subject to an expiry date. The Government is strongly of the view that it is necessary for legislation to deal with the issue of fees as well as expiry dates.

Currently, inactive balance fees apply only to gift cards that can be used to purchase goods or services from a wide range of retailers or service providers, or from retailers and service providers in a specific shopping centre or group of shopping centres, and which constitute electronic money within the meaning of the European Communities (Electronic Money) Regulations 2011. Among other provisions, the regulations provide that an electronic money issuer must, at the request of the electronic money holder, redeem at any time and at par value the monetary value of the electronic money.

While there is a strong argument from a consumer perspective that all gift vouchers should be honoured at their full face value, the providers of electronic money gift cards argue that the costs associated with the provision and management of these products, in particular the requirement to ensure that funds stored on these cards are safeguarded by being stored in segregated bank accounts, require the imposition of fees.

The proposed Government Bill provides accordingly that the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation will have the power to regulate these and other gift voucher fees after undertaking consultations. It is the intention of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to undertake a short consultation over the summer months on the issue. The outcome of this consultation will inform the subsequent decisions to be taken on whether to prohibit, reduce, retain or rebalance these fees. The draft scheme approved by Government and the Private Members' Bill introduced by Deputy Collins both provide for a minimum five-year term for gift vouchers, but they do so in different ways. Deputy Collins's Bill proposes to make terms of less than five years for gift vouchers a prohibited commercial practice under section 55 of the Consumer Protection Act 2007. That Act gives effect to the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive.

As this directive is a full harmonisation measure, providing for the regulation of gift voucher expiry dates as part of a prohibition on commercial practices it runs the risk of legal challenge on the grounds of incompatibility with EU law. In the Government's proposed Bill, the expiry date provision is framed in terms of a prohibition on contract terms which provide for a duration of less than five years for gift vouchers. As the directive on unfair terms in consumer contracts is a minimum harmonisation instrument, a provision framed in this way does not run a similar risk of legal challenge.

Deputy Collins's Bill also contains provisions to ensure that consumers are informed of fees for, or restrictions on, the use of gift vouchers. These provisions do not take account however of those gift vouchers that may come within the scope of the E-Money Directive, which are subject to the detailed information provisions of that directive and of the Payment Services Directive. As both of these directives are full harmonisation instruments, applying additional information requirements to these gift vouchers would raise issues of compatibility with EU law and would also represent an undesirable form of double regulation. Possible gaps in the application of the information provisions of the Consumer Rights Directive to certain gift voucher contracts would be more appropriately dealt with in the consumer rights Bill, which it is hoped will be reactivated in 2019.

Ireland currently does not have clear rules on the expiry dates of gift vouchers, which time and time again results in needless confusion and frustration for consumers. It is extremely frustrating if a person, or somebody close to them, has paid for a voucher only to be told it is no longer valid a relatively short time afterwards. Some retailers honour vouchers in these instances but others do not. This is simply not fair and needs to change.

The issue of fees is a particular bone of contention for consumers. As I mentioned earlier, in some instances fees of as much as €3 per month apply to gift vouchers after 12 months. Many people are unaware of this and often discover it only when they go to use the voucher and find that they have a greatly reduced balance.

I commend Deputy Niall Collins on initiating this very worthwhile Bill. While there are some technical problems with the Bill, the Government appreciates the spirit in which it has been brought forward and therefore will not oppose the Bill on Second Stage. For too long the

waters have been muddled for consumers with greatly varying expiry dates for gift vouchers. The introduction of a minimum five year expiry date will bring certainty to consumers. The issue of dormancy fees reducing the balance on gift vouchers is also a serious cause of irritation for consumers who have bought the voucher in good faith and paid the full cash value. The Government Bill brought forward by the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will deal comprehensively with both of these issues and will ensure effective protection for consumers.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I commend Deputy Niall Collins on bringing forward this Private Members' Bill. The Bill aims to address an issue that causes frustration for many people dealing with gift vouchers. Often, only when people go to use these vouchers do they find that the vouchers can be out of date and worthless. Other consumers are affected when the value of their voucher is run down through fees and charges by the company they purchased it from, due to the voucher not being used within a certain period of time.

Due to a complete absence of regulation this is a very grey area and consumers do not know what rights they have while using these products. Deputy Niall Collins referred to the annual spend of €300 million on gift cards and gift vouchers. This is an enormous spend, and clearly action needs to be taken to ensure protection for the thousands of consumers who buy these products each year.

I acknowledge that the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Heather Humphreys, has also indicated her intention to bring forward her own legislation, which I believe highlights the requirement for action in this area. I hope the Minister can bring forward her solutions soon so we can deal with this problem. It is Deputy Collins, however, who has raised the issue and forced the Government into action on the matter. I note that the same thing has happened with my Sale of Tickets (Sporting and Cultural Events) Bill 2017.

This Consumer Protection (Amendment) Bill proposes that companies have to inform consumers in advance about fees that can be charged on the vouchers. Had Deputy Collins considered a cap on those charges or fees to a percentage of the gift voucher value? I suggest this because some of the fees can be extortionate and this would strike a balance between the costs of servicing the voucher and the consumer's rights.

I have been in contact with a business that wanted me to raise an issue that will arise for them with changes in this area. This particular company sells vouchers for specific described services such as events like motorised racing experiences or hot air balloon trips and so on. A monetary value is not specified for these vouchers, which is why they are often an attractive option for gifts. The company has highlighted the effect a five-year timeframe could have on its business because the cost of an event when the voucher is purchased could be very different to the cost five years later. Insurance and fuel costs are constantly jumping, always higher of course, and we can see the company's concern. I ask that Deputy Collins and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, consider this when they are progressing their respective Bills, to see if a solution can be found for this particular situation.

Many retailers are very flexible in this area already. Most retailers honour gift vouchers or do not put expiry dates on them. The time period for expiry, however, is a problem in many other instances and legislation is needed to regulate this area.

Sinn Féin supports the Consumer Protection (Amendment) Bill 2017. I hope the Bill is not held up by the Government and that we can move forward to regulate this area.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am conscious of the limited participation in this debate. Does the Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, wish to add any further significant comment?

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation(Deputy John Halligan): I wish to make quite clear to Deputy Niall Collins that the Bill will not be delayed. The Government will support the Bill and will not oppose it. As I said, there are some issues. We discussed the aspect of businesses that may have some difficulties. The One4all vouchers, for example, have a potential issue in that it is a business where a whole tranche of money is held by the company and put into a bank. There is a legitimate argument that fees attach to that money if the vouchers are not claimed. It is a small issue.

As I have made clear, the Government does not propose to oppose this Bill, which is comprehensive and worthwhile.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Minister of State for his comments and Deputy Quinlivan for his support. We are all on the same page and want to reach the same end point in terms of consumer protection. The amount of money that is spent on gift cards and vouchers is considerable. Ironically, the people who are most vulnerable to the inadequacies of the law in the unregulated sector are children, who are mainly the ones who receive gift cards and vouchers. That has been my experience.

The Minister of State referenced an Irish success story, the One4all gift voucher, with which everyone in this jurisdiction is familiar. One4all is a well-regulated and well-run business.

Deputy John Halligan: Yes.

Deputy Niall Collins: It is partnered with An Post, which is a commercial semi-State body. Its model is one to which the unregulated sector should aspire. That the money involved is held in a third party escrow account is a positive and comforting factor for people who engage with that entity, which is regulated under the EU's e-money directive.

I thank Deputy Quinlivan, the Sinn Féin Party, the Minister of State and the House.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: That must be the fastest period I have ever seen in which a Private Members' Bill has passed Second Stage.

Deputy Niall Collins: Yes.

Deputy John Halligan: We are all working together.

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish we could do this with many other Bills.

Consumer Protection (Amendment) Bill 2017: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

Deputy Niall Collins: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation pursuant to Standing Orders 84A(3)(a) and 141.

Question put and agreed to.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.55 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 26 June 2018.