



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 2 Deireadh Fómhair 2019*

*Wednesday, 2 October 2019*

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna - Questions

### Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

#### Driver Licences

43. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has engaged with his Cabinet colleagues and UK counterparts to ensure that returning emigrants who hold UK licences will continue to be able to swap their licences for an Irish driver licence even in the event of a no-deal Brexit. [40154/19]

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Has the Minister engaged with his Cabinet colleagues and UK counterparts to ensure that returning emigrants who hold UK driver licences will continue to be able to swap their licence for an Irish licence, even in the event of a no-deal Brexit? There are between 50,000 and 70,000 UK driver licence holders in Ireland, many of whom have yet to swap their licences. Furthermore, the figure does not account for the 400,000 Irish citizens living in the UK, some of whom, if not many, are making arrangements to return home.

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I thank the Deputy for asking this topical question, which is a hot issue in the light of Brexit.

Motorists resident in Ireland with a UK, including Northern Ireland, driver licence are being advised to exchange that licence for an Irish driver licence before 31 October 2019. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, the UK will no longer be a member state and, therefore, the UK driver licence will not be recognised. People resident in Ireland will no longer be able to drive on a UK driver licence. Contingency planning for a no-deal Brexit has been considered by Cabinet

2 October 2019

on many occasions since 2016 and the matter of UK driver licences was included in the issues under consideration. The Road Safety Authority, RSA, has run a number of media campaigns this year including a radio campaign, which commenced on 23 September 2019, to encourage those living in Ireland and holding UK driver licences to exchange them in good time before 31 October 2019. The RSA is also running an ongoing social media campaign.

At the start of this process, as the Deputy noted, it was estimated some 70,000 UK licences were held by people resident in Ireland. Some 34,000 of these have been exchanged to date. The RSA will increase its opening hours at the National Driver Licence Service, NDLS, centres, commencing on 7 October 2019, as will be advertised on *ndls.ie*. Additional resources are also in place at the application processing centre to cater for the expected increased demand. At present, the average waiting time for the exchange of a UK driver licence for an Irish driver licence is three days.

Once the UK leaves the EU, the exchange of driver licences will become a national competency rather than an EU competency. My officials have examined the technical issues that will arise in such a scenario and will seek to put in place alternative arrangements for the exchange of licences, including in the case of returning emigrants currently holding a UK licence. This cannot be completed, however, until after the UK has left the EU. Therefore, I urge any persons who are resident in Ireland and who hold a UK licence to exchange it for an Irish licence and to do so without further delay.

There seems to be a certain dilatoriness and a rather large gap has opened up, given that 70,000 people should take such action whereas more than 30,000 have yet to do so. I regard that as rather disturbing but I hope that in the next few weeks it will be remedied.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** The real answer is we do not yet know how we will accommodate the people in question. As the Minister noted, 34,000 people have exchanged their licences while 36,000 remain to do so. Will the Department put in place additional resources at the driver licence centres to manage the additional demand when it arises? A nurse told me she planned to return in December to take up a new position, having completed her studies and a short working career in the UK. She is unsure what she will be in a position to do but all the Minister is in a position to say is the Government will consider those technical issues after the UK leaves. That is not sufficient for people such as that nurse. She might find herself in the ridiculous position where, having had a competent driving career heretofore, she has to engage in mandatory training on her return, obtain a learner permit and be accompanied while driving. There is a severe absence of common sense to that.

It is clear the introduction of a transitional period may be needed. Common sense demands that should there be a no-deal Brexit, transitional arrangements will have to be in place after 31 October to facilitate people for a period.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** As I outlined, preparations are being made for the sort of scenario the Deputy described. It is anticipated that increased opening hours at the NDLS centres will commence next week and will be advertised on the NDLS website. Additional resources are in place at the application processing centre to cater for the expected increased demand, which the Deputy should recognise. At present, the wait is fairly slow but we expect a rush as the end of October approaches, and we will provide for that.

On the Deputy's question about non-residents, under the 1949 Geneva Convention on Road

Traffic, drivers from contracting states carrying a valid driver licence can drive on one another's roads for up to a year. As Ireland and the UK are contracting states in the Geneva Convention, the position applies and will not change following the withdrawal date. This means that motorists who are not resident in Ireland but who drive in Ireland with a UK driver licence may not be affected by Brexit. It does not matter whether they are emigrants. What matters is where the licence is held and what licence the driver holds.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Will all classifications of UK driving licence be converted to Irish licences? After the fact, does the Minister intend to conclude a bilateral agreement with the UK? While we are speaking specifically today about UK licences in the context of Brexit, there is an overall absence of common sense in our approach to recognising the competency of drivers from elsewhere in the world. I give the example of someone returning from the USA after 30 years who had a licence in Ireland before he or she left. That person cannot get an Irish licence again without being forced to undergo mandatory training, a driving test and status as an accompanied driver simply because we do not have a particular agreement with the USA. We have them with South Korea and East Timor. Broadly speaking, the Department must instruct the driving licence authority to conclude bilateral agreements with these other nations which are not covered. There are a great many people in this position but while we say we want to welcome returning emigrants, we make it very difficult for them to obtain licences when they come home. That has implications for them getting insurance. More broadly, the Minister must be more proactive about acknowledging the competency of returning emigrants, not just those from the UK.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Deputy can be certain that the RSA and the Department will respond to increased demand. If there is increased demand, as the Deputy anticipates, from returning emigrants, they will respond to that. In my opening reply, I said the average waiting time for the exchange of a UK driving licence for an Irish one is three days, which is a very short period. If there is a rush of emigrants returning from the UK and looking for licences, I have no doubt that the RSA will respond. It has already responded fully to the anticipation that 70,000 people would apply and, in fact, they did not all come. As such, the speed with which the RSA is delivering new licences is commendable.

As the Deputy knows, although I do not think it is the intention behind his question, I cannot involve myself in any bilateral negotiations with my British counterparts on this because the EU is carrying out those negotiations. If the UK departs from the EU on 31 October, which I hope it will not, there will then be an opportunity for us to make an agreement which will sort out the problem anticipated by the Deputy.

## **Public Transport**

44. **Deputy Jonathan O'Brien** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if free public transport will be provided for children up to 18 years of age as soon as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39941/19]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Yesterday, Sinn Féin launched its alternative budget, one of the key proposals of which is to make public transport free for all persons under 18 years old. It makes sense from a cost of living perspective, from an economic perspective, from a transport perspective and, in particular, from a climate perspective. Will the Minister follow the initiative we have taken, consider the proposal and implement it?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority, or NTA, has statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares for public passenger transport services with the transport operators. The funding of public service obligation, or PSO, services comprises fares paid by passengers and subvention payments from the Exchequer. The main purpose of the subvention payment is to meet the gap between the income from fares and the cost of operating services. In 2019 alone, the Exchequer has allocated just over €300 million in subvention for PSO transport services and rural transport local link services. Along with that subvention, we are investing almost €480 million this year in public transport and active travel infrastructure.

The Deputy suggests abolishing fares for children up to the age of 18 years. One of the factors to take into account is that the full amount collected from fares is approximately €625 million annually, of which €27.3 million relates to fares for children aged five to 18 years, inclusive, and €49.6 million relates to student fares, some of whom would be expected to be 18 years or younger. I am advised by the Department of Education and Skills that receipts from school transport charges in 2018 amounted to some €15.9 million, or approximately 8% of the total cost of the scheme provided by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. If free travel were provided, this would be the additional cost on the scheme. As such, the rough cost to taxpayers of the Deputy's proposal, including the school transport scheme, would be more than €43 million every year over and above the huge amounts already given to provide for the public transport PSO subvention and capital investment. The Deputy should realise that €43 million is only what it would cost the taxpayer to give a free fares windfall to existing passengers in the under-18 age bracket. It would not pay for one extra bus or one extra passenger journey as it does not factor in the costs of catering for increased passenger travel demand.

I can see that the Deputy is trying to find a way to move more people onto public transport. I applaud any idea of this sort coming forward although I would have a reluctance to accept some ideas on grounds of cost. This idea is neither new nor barmy. It is helpful and adds to the debate. I am sure the Deputy shares my ambition to move more people to public transport. I am working to have a public transport system that provides a sustainable, viable, attractive and economic mode of travel for more people for more of their journeys.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

We all know that our country is facing challenges on climate commitments and on the congestion that this Government is determined to address. That is why we are expanding our public transport fleet so that there are more buses, more trains and longer trams to carry more passengers. We are developing long-term solutions through Metro and the DART expansion. We are enhancing cycle networks and making cities easier to navigate for pedestrians. We are supporting higher frequency bus services in rural areas. We are investing in well-planned, integrated infrastructure and service improvements in all the main cities. That is why we are investing €8.6 billion in sustainable travel under the national development plan. We know our public transport system and active travel networks need to be better. We know they need to better support sustainable mobility by linking more people to more places for more of their journeys. We know it and we are doing it. We are promoting a shift to public transport. We are enabling a shift to cleaner, greener alternatives. Our ambitions are high and the costs are hefty but the House will agree that the costs of not doing it are not acceptable. We cannot let our society drive itself unthinkingly into more congestion, more pollution and more harmful emissions.

Enabling and promoting a shift to more sustainable forms of transport for a higher number of journeys will help reduce Ireland's climate change emissions. Part of this work is to encourage and develop sustainable transport habits among different groups within our population, including the young people. The NTA is conscious of this in exercising its statutory responsibility in relation to fares. Each year, the NTA conducts a thorough examination of public transport fares and publishes on its website the details of this work, including information regarding all fare changes it decides upon. The Deputy will know that the NTA sets the fares for children on PSO services at a level considerably lower than the standard passenger fares. The NTA also runs some targeted promotion initiatives from time to time to stimulate fresh interest in public transport use, including its Kids Go Free promotion offer in July delivered through the Leap card integrated ticket for public transport.

Fares from passengers are one element of meeting the costs of providing and running the public transport system while the State and the taxpayer are the main funders. Any proposal to reduce or abolish passenger fares for a cohort of customers would have to be funded through either an increase in fares for other passenger cohorts or by an increase in PSO funding from the taxpayer via the Exchequer.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Sinn Féin is perfectly aware that there are implications not only in the cost of the free fares but also by way of additional carriage on the system. We have provided for that in our budget by identifying €31 million for free fares and an additional €50 million for the PSO. That is an acknowledgement that one not only needs enhanced capacity for carriage, but that even aside from children, there is a need to expand the number of routes and the coverage provided by Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann, the Luas and so on. There has been a lot of discussion around this. It is important from a climate point of view and an economic one. One aspect of climate policy which the public grasps instinctively is that the number of journeys we take by car is unsustainable. Our proposal would not only make public transport more affordable for families, it would also be habit-forming. It would mean that by 18 years of age, people would be in the habit of taking public transport. In the long run, fares for those aged over 18 years should also be reduced. This proposal represents very good value for money. It would have a real impact on reducing the level of school traffic and traffic generally and foster good public transport habits.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I am not sure that it is good value for money. I spelled out for the Deputy the costs, which are absolutely formidable. It would be very difficult to raise that sort of money. What we are talking about here are substantial sums which it is not guaranteed would deliver on the objective at this stage. The Deputy and his colleagues are approaching the issue in a reformist way, which is helpful, but we must look more closely at proposals like this before we take them on board. The Deputy has seen the Kids Go Free campaign, which reflects some of his thinking and is an effort to get young people into the habit of taking public transport. The scheme was very successful over the summer months. To go to the lengths the Deputy proposes, however, would be very expensive indeed. Nevertheless, to develop new habits in young children to get them used to public transport is something I applaud.

We all know that our country is facing challenges on climate commitments and on the congestion that this Government is determined to address. That is why we are expanding our public transport fleet so that there are more buses, more trains and longer trams to carry more passengers. We are developing long-term solutions through Metro and the DART expansion. We are enhancing cycle networks and making cities easier to navigate for pedestrians. We are supporting higher frequency bus services in rural areas. We are investing in well-planned,

integrated infrastructure and service improvements in all the main cities. That is why we are investing €8.6 billion in sustainable travel under the national development plan. We know our public transport system and active travel networks need to be better. We know they need to better support sustainable mobility by linking more people to more places for more of their journeys. We know it and we are doing it. We are promoting a shift to public transport. We are enabling a shift to cleaner, greener alternatives. We would accept any solution.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The Minister makes the point about formidable cost but there is also a very formidable cost in the large proportion of children travelling to school by car and ensuring the roads are maintained for that purpose. In the long run there is also the potential cost of the fines Ireland may face for carbon emissions. I note the NTA, in its announcement of free travel for children under the age of five in 2017, stated: “The Authority recognises that the cost of travel with a young family can be expensive and today’s move marks another step towards making sustainable transport a more affordable option for more families.” The Minister also referred to the Kids Go Free initiative. Sinn Féin’s proposal is consistent with that logic. I agree with what the NTA said but we must ask what steps have been taken since then. How are we building on these initiatives and how will we increase the number of people who use public transport, including young people? This is not simply a question of doing something nice; this is strategic investment. In all of our major cities there is a chicken and egg scenario, whereby people will not take the bus until cars are moved off the road. People will not make the change until traffic is lighter and buses move quicker. This is an immediate initiative that can kick-start that process.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** We are taking dramatic, radical and substantial measures to do exactly what the Deputy has asked, namely, to get people out of private cars and onto public transport. We also have plans for Cork. I will not list the various measures because I do not have time but the Deputy will be familiar with them, especially those that apply to young people. Our ambitions are high but the costs are hefty. I believe the House will agree that the costs of not doing this are unacceptable. We cannot let our society drive itself unthinkingly into more congestion, more pollution and more harmful emissions. Enabling and promoting a shift to more sustainable forms of transport for a higher number of journeys will help to reduce Ireland’s climate change emissions. Part of this work involves what the Deputy outlined, namely, to encourage and develop sustainable transport habits among different population groups, particularly younger people. The NTA is conscious of this in exercising its statutory responsibility in the area of fares. Each year, the NTA conducts a thorough examination of public transport fares and publishes on its website the details of this work and information regarding all fare changes it decides upon. The Deputy will be aware that the NTA sets the fares for children on public service obligation, PSO, services at a level considerably lower than the standard passenger fares. As noted, the NTA also runs some targeted promotional initiatives from time to time to stimulate fresh interest in public transport, including its Kids Go Free promotion offer in July, which was delivered through the Leap card integrated ticket for public transport.

## **Tourism Funding**

45. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has allocated specific funding or resources to attracting tourists from the Chinese market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40155/19]

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Has the Minister allocated specific resources to attracting tourists from the Chinese market? Perhaps he will enlighten us as to what he has done in that regard. The tourism action plan for the period from 2019 to 2021 does not once mention China or the Chinese market despite the fact that the Chinese are, by some considerable distance, the biggest spending tourists in the world. Chinese tourists make 130 million journeys and spend \$277 billion per annum.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Deputy is right that China is a very important market that deserves considerable attention. I hope he will be satisfied that the tourism agencies are well aware of this and are acting accordingly.

Under the Government's global Ireland strategy, we are committed to developing tourism from new and emerging tourism markets with potential for Ireland. This year, Tourism Ireland has commenced the implementation of a strategy for growth in these markets. In budget 2019, the Government provided almost €4 million in additional funding to Tourism Ireland for this purpose. China, as the largest source of outbound tourism in the world, is one of the main emerging markets we are targeting.

While the resources allocated to any particular market is an operational matter for Tourism Ireland and not for me, I am aware that the additional funding provided has allowed the agency to substantially increase its activity in the Chinese market this year. It has doubled its investment to €1 million and increased its on-the-ground marketing team to 12, including a presence in Hong Kong. It has also increased its publicity, digital and social media activity in the market and continues to interact with the travel trade in the market.

To make the most of the potential from a market such as China it is important that the industry in Ireland is sufficiently prepared to be able to offer visitors a quality experience that meets their requirements. To this end, Fáilte Ireland is working with Irish tourism businesses across the country to help them capitalise on this potential by training them in how to meet the specific needs of the Chinese visitor. Its Get China Ready programme was developed in partnership with Tourism Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland and is jointly delivered with the support of the Centre for Competitiveness, which is the licensed provider of China Outbound Tourism Research Institute programmes in Ireland. With the support of Government, the work being done by the tourism agencies both in China and here in Ireland, together with the industry, leaves us well placed to attract increased tourism from China in the coming years.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Some of the points the Minister makes are certainly welcome. What is the language capability of Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland in the supports they are providing to the industry? Are specific initiatives being taken for the Irish Hotels Federation, the Restaurants Association of Ireland, accommodation providers and so on to upskill in Cantonese and Mandarin and to facilitate them in getting China ready, as the Minister described it? I suggest that €1 million is not a very large investment given the kind of market we are seeking to attract. A good example of a country with a similar population to Ireland is New Zealand. Although one could argue it is closer to the Chinese market, New Zealand has some 450,000 Chinese visitors a year. The best example is probably Iceland. While Ireland had between 70,000 and 75,000 Chinese visitors last year, Iceland, a country of just 340,000 people, welcomed 130,000 Chinese tourists in 2016 and those numbers have continued. Will the Minister consider asking Tourism Ireland to increase its commitment to the Chinese market given that Chinese tourists are the biggest spenders, Chinese people undertake the largest number of outbound journeys and China is the fastest growing tourism market? Will he do more and commit

more to attracting Chinese people to Ireland and, at the same time, commit to getting our own industry China ready?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I am quite prepared to have a conversation with Tourism Ireland on the commitment to which the Deputy referred. I believe the number of Chinese tourists coming here per annum is nearly 100,000. While €1 million may seem a small amount, one must remember that China is a very long way away. It has an enormous population but I acknowledge that if we were to get a very small number of its overseas tourists, it would be a very large number for us. I will not interfere with Tourism Ireland's judgments on how much of its funding allocation from last year it should spend on the Chinese market. That is Tourism Ireland's job. I will, however, convey the Deputy's comments to Tourism Ireland and his view that the Chinese market may be underexplored at this stage. We have a staff of 12 in the tourism agencies in China who are obviously realising the potential that exists.

Tourism Ireland estimates that 100,000 Chinese tourists visited the island of Ireland in 2018. While visitor numbers from China to Ireland are small when compared with established tourism markets, it should be remembered that Chinese visitors spend more than the average tourist and typically stay longer than visitors from markets closer to home.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask the Minister to conclude. He can contribute again for one minute.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** Some 55% of Chinese outbound tourists spend in excess of €2,260 per visit so they are valuable.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister is depriving others of speaking time. Deputy MacSharry has one minute.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I will take less time to make it easier for the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

On the Fáilte Ireland side, I ask that we seek to increase the resources specifically allocated to getting our industry China ready, as the Minister described it. I agree with the Minister that many of our providers, specifically the average hotelier, feel somewhat challenged when welcoming Chinese visitors because they do not have the language or cultural understanding that might be required to give Chinese tourists an adequate experience. Tourism Ireland has invested €1 million in the Chinese market and the Minister has agreed to ask the agency to consider increasing that figure.

Could a specific unit within Fáilte Ireland be enabled and resourced to enhance properly the capability of our service providers of accommodation, restaurants etc. so that they are confident in welcoming Chinese visitors?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I will convey what the Deputy says to Fáilte Ireland and will not express a view on it particularly. I will ask its views and whether it thinks this is worth doing as the Deputy suggests.

In response to any criticism that suggests we are not doing enough, there are direct flights, as the Deputy knows. Hainan Airlines operates a direct flight to Dublin from Beijing and Cathay Pacific operates direct flights from Hong Kong to Dublin. These flights are suspended for the winter but are expected to resume next year. There are also hopes of new flights from China

coming on stream next year. While there are many indirect flights available from mainland China and Hong Kong into Ireland, maintaining direct flights and adding new routes is seen as very important to developing increased tourism from China into Ireland. That indicates the importance the Government attaches to this in that it has agreed there should be direct flights between here and China.

### **Disability Services Provision**

46. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures he is planning to take to ensure equal access to public transport for disabled persons and those with mobility issues in view of the fact that the UNCRPD has been in effect since April 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39942/19]

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Eleven years after the Government promised to sign the UNCRPD it was finally signed in April 2018. However, signing a convention and ensuring equal participation in society for people with disabilities are two different matters. In the area of transport, we are a long way short of the mark. There are massive problems with the regular and frequent breakdown of lifts at the DART stations, stranding people, and denying them access to DART services. There are major problems of accessibility to buses and lack of accessible taxis. The Government needs to do a hell of a lot more. I will go through some of the problems in more detail later but I want to know what the Minister is going to do to make equal access for people with disabilities to public transport a reality.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I thank the Deputy for asking that question. The more he asks it the more welcome it becomes because it is quite right that he continuously makes us accountable for people with disabilities and report to him regularly.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. Under the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008, the National Transport Authority, NTA, has statutory responsibility for promoting the development of an integrated, accessible public transport network.

Article 9 of the UNCRPD provides for equal access for people with disabilities to facilities and services, including transportation. Article 4.2 of the convention provides for the progressive realisation of accessibility rights which includes practical progress on public transport accessibility. This is the approach adopted in Ireland on public transport and is being progressed in the context of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, my Department's sectoral plan under the Disability Act 2005 and other relevant Government strategies and plans.

Accessibility features, such as wheelchair access and audio and visual aids are built into all new public transport infrastructure and vehicles from the design stage. New systems, such as Luas, are fully accessible. The National Development Plan, NDP, 2018-2027 sets out the national vision and ambition for the delivery of key infrastructure over the lifetime of the plan, including for public transport infrastructure. Investment in public transport will be accelerated under the NDP to support the development of an integrated and sustainable national public transport system. A number of key new major public transport programmes are due to be delivered under the NDP over the period to 2027.

However, there are legacy issues in relation to older infrastructure and facilities, for ex-

ample, our Victorian era railway stations. To address these infrastructural legacy issues, my Department funds the accessibility retrofit programme which is managed by the National Transport Authority, NTA. The four-year capital envelope for public transport announced in budget 2018 includes a multi-annual allocation of almost €28 million for the accessibility retrofit programme for the period 2018 to 2021. This funding is a trebling of the previous allocation for accessibility under the capital plan.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

This funding will facilitate the continued roll-out of the programmes to install accessible bus stops, upgrade train stations to make them accessible to wheelchair users and provide grant support for the introduction of more wheelchair accessible vehicles into the taxi fleet. There will also be a continued investment programme under the NDP to fund the retrofitting of older public transport facilities to enhance accessibility.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department and its agencies are committed to meeting our obligations under the UNCRPD on the progressive realisation of public transport accessibility.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Government has had 11 years to progressively realise equality and it is still a long way short. I will give the Minister a glimpse of the reality on the DART. On 22 August, lifts were out of order in nine stations; on 6 September, they were out of order in eight; on 9 September, online information stated lifts were out of order in two stations when in fact the number was six; and on 23 September online information stated no lifts were out of order when in fact eight were. Seán O’Kelly, a wheelchair user and disability activist, who is in the Visitors Gallery today said that in August he was due to meet somebody in Pearse Street station. He came from Glenageary. On his return he decided to go to Blackrock where he understood the lift was functioning. When he got there he found that it was not. He then had to go on to Salthill and back to Blackrock on the other side, and then had to go to Booterstown in order to get to Glenageary. In other words, what should have been a three-stop journey became a six-stop journey because of the problems with lifts at DART stations.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I deeply regret Seán’s experience. His was a dilemma that has probably happened to other people. The Deputy is right there have been problems in the lifts and that highlights the daily difficulties for people with disabilities. I met Seán last Friday and am aware of the situations that occur. I met one of the Deputy’s local election candidates at the same time.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Bernard.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** A concern for people with disabilities occurs when facilities such as lifts at train stations are out of service for long periods. Irish Rail has assured the Department that it is committed to providing all its customers, including those who are mobility and sensory impaired, with the highest level of accessibility on its rail network. When lifts get damaged and are out of service some specialised parts may be required which can take some time to be delivered. Irish Rail endeavours to return all out-of-service lifts to operational service as quickly as possible. The company’s provider of lift maintenance services gives priority to lifts for repair and attention.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is just not good enough and in order to highlight this, Bernard Mulvany, who the Minister mentioned, and Seán O’Kelly and others, have had to organise multiple protests about this. It is not acceptable and we need it sorted urgently.

The four hours' notice to access trains in Dublin and the 24 hours needed in the country is not equality. Some private bus companies which do not get state aid do not have to be accessible. There is a lack of accessible taxis. One taxi driver told me that there is a new purpose-built, all electric taxi in London that is fully accessible. If we redirected some of the grants for accessible taxis to purchase those and dropped the vehicle registration tax, VRT, we could have lots of accessible taxis in Dublin in short order. A lot more needs to be done. There needs to be a real focus on this. The situations that Seán and others find themselves in are absolutely unacceptable. Equality means equality.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** Equality is where we are absolutely determined to head. I do not have time to list the number of initiatives we have taken on this, including the trebling of funding, and the appointment to every transport board of somebody with experience of disabilities in order to raise the realisation at every single stage. We have done a great deal but it is not enough. The Deputy is right; it will never be enough until everything he suggested is achieved. We are determined to do these things. We are doing what is called progressive realisation. We will have to report on it in Geneva in 2020. We are aiming to produce a really good report. Not only do I think that it will be achieved, I am of the view that we will be on the way. That is the mark of our determination and our resolve.

Irish Rail has put a new system into operation at Howth Junction and Clongriffin stations which closes off the lift when it is called by customers. The call goes to a monitored CCTV room. This has reduced vandalism issues at both stations. Benefits include controlling access to the lifts with passengers who require the service most, remote fault and alarm status of lifts in service updated to Irish Rail's website, higher availability of lift services for customers with disabilities, and visual monitoring. A further 14 stations-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** -----have been identified at a cost of €50,000 per station. Irish Rail is developing a proposal for the works-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan. Before she comes in, I must be fair to everybody. I ask the Minister and Deputies not to take advantage as there are others waiting to ask questions. If the rules are to be changed and a minute is to be extended to two minutes that will have to be done in another forum.

## **Road Traffic Legislation**

47. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the outstanding issues relating to licences for the operation of horse-drawn carriages in Dublin. [39765/19]

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** This question relates to outstanding issues regarding licences for the operation of horse-drawn carriages in Dublin.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I know that she is very much acquainted with the issues relating to it but, for the consideration of the House, I would like to provide some background information.

In February 2011, Dublin City Council, DCC, took over responsibility for the licensing of

horse-drawn carriage operators and drivers from the Garda Carriage Office. This was achieved through by-laws enacted under Part 19 of the Local Government Act 2001. The latter provides a general power to a local authority to make by-laws in relation to its own property or services or to regulate matters of local concern. It is under this Act that local authorities can choose, using by-laws, to regulate horse-drawn carriages that operate for hire or reward within their functional areas. These by-laws allow relevant local authorities to set their own rules and stipulations to govern such operations.

In 2018, DCC became aware that - specifically in the context of Dublin - this legal basis for making such by-laws could be uncertain. Local authorities may not make by-laws for purposes provided for elsewhere in legislation and the Dublin Carriage Acts 1853 to 1855 had previously vested the power to regulate horse-drawn carriages in Dublin with the Dublin Metropolitan Police Commissioners, the predecessor of An Garda Síochána.

My Department examined this issue and, following legal advice, is now of the view that the Dublin Carriage Acts 1853 to 1855 remain in force and preclude DCC from enacting the relevant by-laws.

Having given this matter careful consideration, I formed the view that the operation of horse-drawn carriages for hire or reward is best regulated by local authorities. I understand that DCC first became aware of the present legal issues during a routine review of the by-laws that considered, *inter alia*, whether there was need to strengthen measures to safeguard the welfare of horses used to draw carriages.

Animal welfare issues are a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The Control of Horses Act 1996 allows local authorities to introduce by-laws designating certain areas as control areas for horses. DCC has designated its administrative boundaries as such a control area under its Control of Horses Bye-Laws 2014. These by-laws require horses to be licensed and set minimum standards for the keeping of horses within the control area.

Regulations for horse-drawn carriages for hire or reward should be aligned with any horse welfare obligations imposed by local authorities. Accordingly, I am of the view that horse-drawn carriages for hire and reward should be regulated by local authorities.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

As I mentioned earlier, legal advice provided to my Department suggests that a simple repeal of the Victorian legislation alone may not be sufficient to enable DCC to enact by-laws for horse-drawn carriages. On foot of receipt of that advice, my Department is now working with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to identify how best to empower DCC to regulate this matter in Dublin, just as other local authorities elsewhere regulate it.

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** This shows what happens to an issue when responsibility for it falls between several different authorities. A terrible difficulty has arisen within that gap. Tourists and others take horse-drawn carriage rides in the mistaken assumption that the drivers are fully vetted and insured, that the carriages have been inspected and approved, that the horses are suitable to draw the carriages, that the drivers are skilled in the operation of the carriage and that regulations have been set down. That is an assumption not borne out by the reality of the legislation. I have met some very responsible operators. There was a very nice event held on Merrion Square, which happened to be in the rain, featuring carriages and their drivers. They

are very concerned about operating in this vacuum. In the meantime, tourists assume that everything is all right. We hope that it will not take a serious accident to bring this matter to the fore. Can the various groups be brought together, perhaps under the Minister's leadership, to resolve this once and for all? The longer it goes on, the more abuses take place.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Deputy is correct that there is a lacuna and a vacuum. It is difficult for me to defend because it has taken too long. I apologise to here for that. It is complicated because at least three Departments are involved. She is correct in her comments in that regard. Three Departments are involved in what is a relatively minor issue in the scheme of things; many have been solely involved in emergency legislation relating to Brexit, so that might be a tangential reason for the delay. That does not mean that there should not be an urgency in respect of the matter. There is an obligation on us to bring the Departments of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Transport, Tourism and Sport and, perhaps, Justice and Equality together and to involve the Office of the Attorney General and others, as well as the local authority, which would have to be included.

I received a briefing from my officials on this matter yesterday because I knew the question was coming up. I hope that I have instilled a sense of real urgency in them as I was somewhat distressed that this was taking so long. Perhaps it is not the fault of anyone in particular and comes down to the fact that so many parties are involved. However, I will try to inject a renewed sense of urgency in respect of the matter

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** Without meaning any disrespect, we were told this before. There is also the matter of the welfare of the horses being used to draw the carriages. Many, including myself, applauded the Minister on his action in relation to greyhound racing. That was very welcome. The lack of minimum requirements is having a detrimental effect on the welfare of some of the horses as there is no clear minimum standard. There is a need for this industry to be regulated and to have by-laws that are up to date and that serve the industry well. From what the Minister has told us, I hope it will receive the urgent attention it needs as it has been going on for far too long. Some of the Acts date back to the 19th century. The legislation must be brought up to date.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Deputy has put her finger on it. I am not absolving myself of blame but the fact that so many Acts date back so far makes the matter much more complicated, obscure and also very time consuming, especially when there are several items of legislation involved.

Animal welfare is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine. I am not passing the buck but I will make sure he knows of the content of this debate. The Control of Horses Act 1996 provides powers to local authorities to designate, using by-laws, control areas within which horses are required to be licensed and where minimum standards are set for keeping horses. In this regard, DCC has designated its administrative area as such a control area under the Control of Horses Bye-Laws 2014, the enforcement of which is a matter for the council. The council's responsibilities and experience in horse licensing and welfare matters is one reason we have concluded that the council is the best place to regulate horse-drawn carriages for hire or reward in Dublin.

In the context of animal welfare more generally, the Control of Horses Act 1996 gives powers to members of An Garda Síochána to seize and detain horses and to require veterinary inspections. Under animal health legislation, the Garda also has powers of arrest in respect of

incidents of animal cruelty.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Brexit Preparations**

48. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on whether the transport system particularly at major entry and exit points is adequately prepared for the ramifications of a no-deal Brexit. [39769/19]

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** Does the Minister believe that the transport system, notably at our major entry and exit points, is adequately prepared for the ramifications of a no-deal Brexit? As he is aware we face the distinct possibility, particularly in light of the proposals coming from the United Kingdom in the past 24 hours, of a no-deal Brexit. It is an outcome that would have disastrous implications for the island of Ireland. Among the many problems which will arise is the impact it will have on Ireland's importers and exporters, most notably at our ports and entry points.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Government has extensive preparations in place for a possible no-deal Brexit on 31 October 2019. In its action plan published in July 2019, the Government acknowledged that a no-deal Brexit will be highly disruptive and will have profound implications across all aspects of society. It would be impossible for the UK to maintain the current seamless arrangements with the EU across the full range of sectors, including transport connectivity, trade flows and supply chains.

The contingency plans in place, including in the transport sector, will mitigate but cannot eliminate the impacts of a no-deal Brexit. The reintroduction of customs or border controls as a consequence of Brexit will undoubtedly increase transit times for all traffic travelling via or from the UK to continental Europe, including for many Irish importers and exporters. The three locations for which Ireland is heavily dependent on connectivity to the UK are Dublin Port, Dublin Airport and Rosslare Europort. The OPW has worked with relevant agencies and Departments in delivering the required facilities for agriculture, health and customs checks at these locations. Temporary facilities are now in place to meet the needs of these agencies. Additional staffing in customs and excise and the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Health have been recruited and trained to provide the necessary support and to manage the efficient movement of freight and people through these locations. The necessary associated staffing and IT systems are also in place. I understand that testing of the relevant IT systems is continuing. Communications with stakeholders is ongoing and will continue during October 2019. My Department is also working closely with other agencies to have appropriate traffic management plans in place in the event that there is significant congestion in Dublin Port that impacts on wider traffic flows in the surrounding road network.

Regarding wider transport systems and services, the EU has adopted time-limited measures to ensure basic transport connectivity with the UK in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The temporary measures cover air transport connectivity to the end of March 2020, road freight connectiv-

ity to 31 December 2019 and cross-Border bus connectivity, also to 31 December. The EU is considering proposals to extend these arrangements to 24 October 2020 in respect of aviation and to 31 July 2020 in respect of internal haulage and cross-Border bus services.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

In respect of rail, Iarnród Éireann and Northern Ireland Railways are working together to ensure the Enterprise service continues to run post Brexit.

There are concerns about potential disruption to the UK landbridge immediately after the UK's exit. My Department, along with the Irish Maritime Development Office, has met all the main ferry companies and has been assured that not only does sufficient capacity exist on alternative direct routes to continental EU ports, but should the demand for additional capacity arise as a result of Brexit, the shipping companies can respond. It is recognised, however, that these longer direct routes may not be a suitable alternative for all goods, particularly time-sensitive products.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I thank the Minister. Only 200,000 of the 1.3 million containers arriving in Dublin Port originate from outside the EU. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, that figure would rise to 1 million, which would be an astronomical increase in customer requirements. Dublin Port is our largest port, handling 38 million tonnes of cargo per annum. The equivalent of 13 km, or approximately 8 miles, of containers are dispatched and offloaded in the hour before dawn. The port's CEO has been open about the mismatch between the unpreparedness of hauliers, importers and exporters and the capacity of State agencies to cope. It would be negligent of us not to plan on the basis that there could be congestion. I am concerned that our only response to this so far is to make arrangements to text message truck drivers and ask them to pull in at truck stops and wait until the congestion passes. This is hardly a foolproof plan underpinned by a substantial vision to deal with the problem before us. We hear that Rosslare may be able to assist, but its arrangements will not be in place until January 2021.

Has the Minister confidence in the ports' ability to handle a no-deal Brexit? Have the systems he has planned been road tested?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I have full confidence in what Dublin Port has done. I cannot guarantee that there will not be disruption. We are anticipating disruption in a no-deal Brexit, but we are doing everything possible to mitigate those circumstances. Dublin and Rosslare ports have taken all necessary measures possible. There will also be congestion at Dover, Calais, Holyhead, Liverpool and elsewhere, but what measures are taken there will be outside our control.

The Deputy is not completely right about the preparations at Dublin Port. I will outline some of them. A traffic management group chaired by my Department is considering the potential knock-on impacts on the wider area and city traffic management of any potential disruption at Dublin Port in a no-deal scenario. The group is focusing on possible disruption and associated traffic management communication contingency plans for a no-deal Brexit.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I feel sorry for the hauliers who are going to get the text message. God knows where they will be when they get it. Some 40% of our unitised exports will go via the landbridge, as the Minister well knows. We have a great deal of time-sensitive agricultural and pharmaceutical produce. Has the Minister met Dublin Port and the major ferry companies to establish alternative routes to the landbridge that would be attractive and quick to market for time-sensitive goods in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I have met the ferry companies on various occasions, as have my officials. It is important that we have contact with the ferry companies, given that the landbridge could be a flashpoint. It is anticipated that there could be difficulties if there are queues at Dover. The question for the ferry companies has been whether they would be able to provide the additional capacity that might be necessary in the event of queues at Dover, other British ports and elsewhere and hauliers deciding to take a direct route to the Continent. The companies have assured us that they would have the capacity to take the extra demand and that they would respond rapidly to queues and difficulties at ports as a result of the landbridge.

There are alternatives to the landbridge. There is air freight, but that is probably only for high-value, low-volume freight. There is lo-lo, which will obviously take longer. There are direct routes to the Continent that can be taken. We are looking at these alternatives aggressively. Communication with ferry companies has been ongoing for months. We are confident that the necessary measures will be ready if we need them.

### **Road Safety Authority Campaigns**

49. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on whether the Road Safety Authority, RSA, should upscale its road safety campaigns, especially in the case of speeding and aggressive driving practices, in view of the tragic and disappointing road traffic casualty figures to date in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39754/19]

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** Something like 112 people have tragically lost their lives on the roads this year, seven more than at this stage last year. The breakdown is 21 pedestrians, 59 drivers, 13 passengers, 12 motorcyclists, five cyclists and two pillion passengers. Does the RSA need to upscale its major campaigns to try to bring home the message to speeding and aggressive drivers in particular that their behaviour is perhaps the key cause of these tragic figures?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The figures for deaths on our roads this year are disappointing and a matter of serious concern for the RSA, the Deputy and me. We have seen a general long-term downward trend in road deaths on Irish roads over the past two decades. The number of road deaths dropped from 458 in 1998 to a record low of 144 in 2018, a decrease of more than 68%. This result has been achieved through the work of many people and organisations, better maintenance of roads, improved standards for and testing of vehicles, significant increases in the standard of driver training, and a wide variety of public messages to improve the awareness of safety among the road-using public, complemented by effective enforcement and the ongoing development of road traffic law, including a new regime for drug-driving and, most recently, tougher legislation on drink-driving, which I introduced last year. Organisations such as the PARC Road Safety Group and the Irish Road Victims Association, IRVA, should also be applauded and singled out for their bravery and the effectiveness of their road safety campaigns.

As is widely acknowledged, the lower the number of road deaths becomes, the more difficult it is to reduce the number of tragedies on our roads further. Last year's figure of 144 road deaths was a record low, as was the figure of 157 in 2017. We have always known that it is a challenge to keep up the pressure to reduce the figures further, as seen across Europe.

In general, speeding is one of the principal causes of deaths on our roads and roads across

the world. In respect of recent road deaths, however, it is important to remember that the Garda is still conducting investigations into those cases. We should not prejudge what particular factors will turn out to have been involved in them.

I agree with the Deputy that the work of the RSA in getting the message out about the dangers of speeding and other irresponsible driving practices is an essential component in maintaining pressure. Speeding is a crucial factor in more ways than one. As the Deputy, who has taken a keen interest in road safety for many years, will be aware, speeding not only increases the risk of collisions, but significantly increases the probability of death or serious injury resulting from collisions. It is the single most important factor, nationally and internationally, in road deaths. The RSA works strenuously every year to promote public awareness of road safety, including the danger of speeding. A targeted anti-speeding campaign was conducted last May, and another is planned for later in October, around national slow down day.

At the same time, it has always been the case that we need to act on multiple fronts. That is what we have been doing in the overarching framework provided by the national road safety strategy and which was reinforced by the mid-term review of the current strategy.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I am aware of the many campaigns the RSA has been pursuing, such as those on unaccompanied learner drivers, the wearing of seatbelts, crashed lives, the safe cross code and so on. Thursday, 26 September was European day without a road death, EDWARD, but there seemed to be little promotion of it, either here or Europe-wide. Next week, from 7 to 13 October is Irish road safety week and issues such as drink-driving, tyre safety, speeding, leading lights, motorcycle safety, drug-driving and driver fatigue will all presumably be highlighted. Is any research or evaluation being carried out on the impact of the RSA's current campaigns, which focus on singular issues? Would it not be better to concentrate on overall driver behaviour, including aggressive driving, tailgating and moving at great speed while changing lanes and overtaking? It might be better to focus on that in a broad, dramatic way in order to get the message across to drivers to slow down.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I am always open to suggestions from Deputy Broughan on reducing deaths, as he knows. I take his point about a lack of promotion of project EDWARD. The Deputy must not have seen much about it. A large media event was held to mark it last week in Dublin Castle, which was attended by me, the Garda Commissioner, the chief executive of the RSA and several other people who were involved. I do not know whether it attracted much publicity but I would guess, based on what the Deputy has said, that it did not. It is not within our power to tell the newspapers or media what to cover. Sometimes they cover the things we want them to and sometimes they do not. I was disappointed that it did not get much more coverage. It was a dark and difficult day for road deaths as there were two deaths on the roads just after midnight. The committee on road safety, on which I, the Minister for Justice and Equality, the Garda, the RSA and others sit, meets every quarter. I would be happy to take the Deputy's suggestions to that committee.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** The RSA's current road safety strategy aims to reduce collisions, deaths and injuries by 30%. There is huge interest across the world in the vision zero approach, which Sweden, other Scandinavian countries and Canada have been pursuing. It seems there is a lacuna in the RSA's requirement to develop and implement sufficiently successful information and education campaigns.

The other element of this issue is enforcement. Both this and the previous Government

slashed the size of the traffic police by more than half. The Garda Commissioner says he wants to return the numbers of traffic police to more than 1,000 and get it back up to the kind of force we had in the mid-2000s. Is that something on which the Minister will work? We are also hearing that the tender for handheld devices has not even gone out yet.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** Enforcement is a matter for the Department of Justice and Equality. I understand that the Deputy is frustrated by the fact that there are not enough gardaí on the roads. There will probably never be enough gardaí on the roads for enforcement purposes, though numbers are increasing. I will convey the Deputy's message to the Minister for Justice and Equality when I see him at the next meeting on road safety, which he regularly attends.

The Deputy asked about speeding. My proposals for a graduated speeding penalty system, which will be more targeted and proportionate, are due to be considered shortly at a Cabinet committee. Evidence suggests that drivers continue to drive in excess of the safe legal speed limits. A more robust approach is needed-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Members are waiting. I am not being critical, but the Minister's answers are going on too long. There is a two-minute rule and that is it. I am being more than reasonable. I know this is important, but the fact that we have only completed a few questions is an embarrassment. I must implement Standing Orders. I call Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, who is taking the next question.

### Public Transport Initiatives

50. **Deputy Jonathan O'Brien** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to implement the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39905/19]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I have regularly raised with the Minister over the last two years or so the need for increased investment in bus and light rail transport in Cork city, and the publication of the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy. That strategy was belatedly published earlier this year and is an ambitious plan in many respects, though parts could be more so. The first part of the consultation on the overall strategy is complete, though there is more to come, and we now need to decide how to implement the strategy. I emphasise that this is not only about the long-term plan, but about what we are going to do in the next few years.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Deputy and I are in complete agreement in welcoming the work completed so far in developing a draft Cork metropolitan area transport strategy and engaging with the public on that draft to hear their views. Its ambition fits within the framework created by Project Ireland 2040, namely, building a better and more sustainable Ireland.

The Deputy will acknowledge that the strategy is not yet finalised or adopted by the local authorities, because the views gathered from the very recent public consultation are still under consideration. Equally, the Deputy will acknowledge that the strategy in its draft form proposes a range of significant measures to improve sustainable mobility in Cork. The plan contains short-term, medium-term and longer-term proposals for delivering the strategy's overall ambition.

Project Ireland 2040 currently contains funding for projects over the next decade, including

projects in Cork which will see improvements to Cork's bus infrastructure and active travel infrastructure, as well as some important improvements to the road network. Increases in public service obligation, PSO funding in recent years have already allowed for notable bus service improvements in Cork, such as the introduction of Ireland's first 24-hour PSO bus service, which I understand has been a great success. Funding is available to support the implementation of those proposed shorter-term measures.

However, as I mentioned, the draft strategy as published for public consultation looks to the future, beyond the current ten-year Project Ireland 2040 funding horizon. That is exactly the type of long-term planning we need and is perhaps something we have not been successful in doing in the past. That long-term funding horizon will be considered as part of the mid-term review of Project Ireland 2040. When we come to that review, the medium-term and longer-term requirements of Cork will be set out in the finalised strategy and will inform our overall funding requirements for the next ten years.

I look forward to the finalisation of the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy in November, its adoption by the local authorities and to working with those local authorities in its implementation over the course of the next 20 years.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** There is a significant feeling in Cork that we have an opportunity to learn from things that were not done right in Dublin over the last 20 or 30 years. We need to ensure, as the city grows rapidly, that it does not do so on the strength of motor traffic, but rather improved public transport. Focusing too much on the short term is a problem, but taking too much of a long-term view can be a problem as well. There is a danger of adopting an ambitious grand plan which sets many objectives to be achieved eight, ten or 15 years into the future but does not provide for enough action in the next two, three or five years to get people out of their cars and onto buses and walking, cycling, etc. I would like to hear more about how the Minister intends to support that with investment from his Department. I would also like to put to him a proposal that the Cork Chamber of Commerce has put to me. The proposal calls for an NTA oversight delivery office for this strategy. I believe the NTA would be very open to that.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** Cork would be lucky if it could benefit from mistakes made by Dublin. Some of our proposals for Dublin, like BusConnects, will not be mistakes. They will be extended to Cork and other cities as well. They will have a dramatic effect in moving people out of their private cars and onto buses. That is the intention for Cork and Dublin and the vision for the entire country. I should say that the strategy referred to in the Deputy's question is a 20-year plan. It does not promise some sort of panacea which will sort out the traffic problem in Cork in the short term. We have a real challenge in Dublin, Cork, Galway and other cities which we cannot solve by simply waving a magic wand. We have laid out in our answer our plans for buses, which would cost €545 million. Our plans for heavy rail will cost €274 million, active travel will account for €220 million, light rail will account for €1 billion, and roads will amount to €1.39 billion. That is a serious commitment to Cork in the long term.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I was not saying that Cork would benefit from the mistakes of Dublin but rather that it might learn from them. I am not even talking about the recent past. I am talking about 20 or 30 years of excessive reliance on the car and underuse of public transport.

The Minister did not answer the specific question. The Cork Chamber of Commerce has made a proposal. It is eminently sensible and I think the NTA would be very open to it. We

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need a mixture of both short-term and long-term solutions. The Minister is right to say we cannot wave a magic wand, but some improvements are deliverable in the short term while planning for long-term projects that take a while to deliver, such as the light rail proposal. That proposal calls for a Cork-based oversight delivery office to ensure the delivery of this.

On two or three previous occasions, the Minister and I discussed the need to build on bus rapid transit with light rail in the medium to long term. Is the Minister committed to ensuring that this is delivered in the medium to long term?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I am aware of the Cork Chamber of Commerce's proposal for an oversight office in Cork to ensure delivery of the strategy. As far as I am aware, the NTA has no plans to do that.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** It has no objection either.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I am sure the NTA is aware of the Deputy's feelings about that. I have not spoken to the Cork Chamber of Commerce, but I am sure it has made this proposal known to the NTA. If it has not done so, I will certainly be happy to convey it to the NTA and hear its reaction.

This is difficult. We are committed to implementation, but obviously we will have to negotiate the funding for these requirements of the plan as the time approaches. It will probably be after my time in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, but I believe any successor of mine will retain that commitment and do everything he or she can to implement this plan for the benefit of Cork.

## Electric Vehicles

51. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the details of the findings from the low-emission bus trials; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39773/19]

**Deputy John Curran:** Trials of low-emission buses have been conducted. Will the Minister give an overview of those trials, the types of buses that were trialled and the outcomes regarding their effectiveness and range? Particularly from the point of view of Dublin, where air quality is of concern, what improvements could we expect from making a transition to these low-emission vehicles?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The movement to low-emission urban buses is central to the promotion and normalisation of cleaner fuels and technologies. A major shift to cleaner alternatives across the entire transport sector is necessary if we are to reduce harmful emissions.

I am sure the Deputy recognises that the emissions savings potential from the urban bus fleet alone is limited because buses account for less than 3% of land transport emissions. That is why I am also maintaining a strong focus on expanding the carrying capacity of our public transport system over the coming years. That is how we can really help address the largest sustainability challenge in the transport sector, namely, shifting more journeys from private motoring towards suitable alternatives in public transport and active travel.

I assure the Deputy that we are on a clear pathway to low-emission urban buses. Imple-

menting our commitment in the national development plan since this summer, Ireland is no longer buying diesel-only urban public buses. Dublin Bus has already taken delivery of six electric hybrid buses, with a further three expected to be delivered by the year's end. There is a clear target in the climate action plan for 100 low-emission buses to be on the road by the end of 2020. The NTA has initiated a tender to award a framework contract for double-deck diesel-electric hybrid buses.

The bus trial compared a range of low-emission buses along representative routes in Dublin and Cork. It provided useful insights into which technologies might be most appropriate in an Irish context. A comprehensive report outlining the findings of the trial was issued to my Department earlier this month and I have sent the report to the NTA for its consideration. I have published a high-level executive summary of the findings of the trial on my Department's website in line with a climate action plan commitment, and I also intend to release a non-commercially sensitive version of the full report before the end of the year.

In summary, the results from the trial show that electric buses performed strongly across a range of metrics. Electric-hybrid technology, where deployed in conjunction with certain bio-fuels, also emerged as a potentially viable alternative, as did biogas. The overall results suggest that electrification represents a feasible option for fleet transition that could help us to tackle our carbon emissions, improve air quality and increase our use of renewable energy in transport.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

However, it is important to note that fully electric double-deck models were not available for trial and that these results refer to single-deck electric vehicles. Indeed, electric double-deck models are only slowly becoming available.

The NTA is reviewing the outcomes of the trial and these, together with supply and operational considerations, will feed into the NTA's development of a medium-term fleet technology pathway for the urban public bus fleet. That strategy is due to be brought forward by the NTA by the end of the year.

**Deputy John Curran:** I am sorry the Minister did not start at the end of his reply instead of the beginning, which had nothing to do with the question I asked. I specifically asked about the bus trials. He was getting to that when time ran out. I specifically want to know whether fully electric buses were included in that trial. They are being trialled in many other European cities. Alternatively, was the trial restricted to hybrid buses?

Second, if we move from full diesel to diesel-electric hybrids, which are the buses currently on trial, what will be the net reduction in our carbon emissions? I was disappointed when the Minister indicated that from July 2019 we would no longer buy all-diesel buses, but then bought diesel buses at the start of that year and effectively pushed the decision on hybrid vehicles into next year. This is important because the Minister's influence is not confined to Dublin Bus and buses in the national fleet. The Government's actions impact on other purchasers and can make electric or hybrid buses the norm, rather than what they are at the moment. Perhaps the Minister might comment specifically on the trials.

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I will provide the Deputy with some more information. The trial compared 15 different bus models of different technology types across a range of parameters. Fully electric, hybrid electric and compressed natural biogas models were tested alongside two exhaust-retrofitted diesel buses. The buses were assessed for CO<sub>2</sub> and air pollutant emissions,

energy efficiency, cost and infrastructure requirements. Trials ran from December 2018 to April 2019 in Dublin and Cork. The two primary objectives of the trials were to implement a method of testing which would be repeatable and would provide a fair means of comparing different technologies. The findings of the trials have taken us a considerable way towards clarifying our longer-term trajectory for low-emission buses, with electrification identified as the preferred technology. It is important to note that bus procurement is complex. While reducing carbon and pollutant emissions is a key priority for this Government, a range of factors must also be considered when determining the most appropriate alternative to diesel buses.

We did keep our promise about July. The Deputy should not say we did not. The buses bought before that time were low-emissions diesel vehicles.

**Deputy John Curran:** That promise was kept but it was not done in an upright fashion. The announcement was made that from July there would be no further purchases of diesel buses but diesel buses were bought before July so there would be no demand for the rest of the year. What vehicles are being committed to now? Will they be hybrid electric, full electric or both? The Minister has indicated that next year there will be 100 of these low-emissions vehicles bought. How will this translate to carbon reduction and will there be a specific impact on air quality in Dublin? As the Minister knows well, that air quality is now at a level that is inappropriate and unacceptable. Will the Minister clearly indicate if the vehicles to be trialled and rolled out over the coming years will full or hybrid electric?

**Deputy John Lahart:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for facilitating me and I welcome the question from my colleague. The National Transport Authority, NTA, announced it was to purchase 600 hybrid diesel vehicles but it seems the jury is out on that. The Minister said the preference is for electrification of the fleet, so how can the NTA indicate it will purchase 600 hybrid diesels in the coming years when we do not have the full results of testing? Hydrogen is used as a power source for buses in Scotland and Brussels but the Minister has not mentioned it. I have read some reports on the effectiveness of hybrid diesel buses in London and many of them are running fully on diesel because the system is not effective. I take the Minister's point about the complications in this regard. How can the NTA state it will purchase 600 hybrid diesel buses when the jury is out on what system would be most suitable for Dublin transport?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** Deputy Curran spoke about the buses that were bought. The Deputy is correct that before July, the NTA placed an order for Euro 6 standard diesel buses as part of its long-term fleet replacement and expansion programme. Euro 6 technology is the greenest diesel option and these buses will be deployed to replace the oldest and most polluting Euro 3 and Euro 4 standard models in the fleet, with consequent improvements to levels of air pollutant emissions. It is worth noting a switch to alternative fuels and technologies represents a considerable State investment in supporting infrastructure. We are absolutely determined that there shall be no more diesel-only buses and we will keep that pledge.

In the short term, we may move to hybrid buses but the medium-term procurement strategy has yet to be finalised. Electric buses are scarce and my Department sought to source a hydrogen and double-deck electric bus for assessment as part of the trial but was unable to do it at the time of testing. These options may not currently be commercially feasible in the right-hand drive market. However, the potential for the deployment of zero-emission hydrogen or double-deck electric buses should not be discounted as technologies and markets are developing apace.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Sports Funding**

52. **Deputy Jonathan O'Brien** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will reopen with additional funding the large-scale sports infrastructure fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39906/19]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The large-scale sports infrastructure fund has been very much in demand but it is unclear how much is budgeted for this in 2020. A figure of €100 million was mentioned so when will it be rolled out? There is a large demand for this type of fund so will the Minister look at reopening it?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** I thank the Deputy for the question, the subject of which is prompting much interest from all Deputies. It is a very important fund. The national sports policy published last year provided for the establishment of a new large-scale sport infrastructure fund. The aim of the fund is to provide support for larger sports facilities where the Exchequer investment is greater than the maximum amount available under the sports capital programme. These may be projects where the primary objective would be to increase active participation in sport or large-scale venues or stadia where the focus is more related to social participation and high-performance sport. The new fund is designed to provide a transparent and robust system for funding such projects.

The Government has provided a capital allocation of at least €100 million for the period to 2027 for the large-scale sport infrastructure fund. The new scheme closed for applications on 17 April, with applications initially confined to local authorities and national governing bodies of sport. By the closing date, 72 applications were received. Details of all applications received have been published on the Department's website, along with the evaluation procedures and guidelines. Assessment is continuing in the Department but in view of the detailed information contained in each application, it will take a number of months to complete all this work. Accordingly, I expect that it will be towards the end of this year before any allocations are announced.

There are no plans to reopen the scheme. After allocations are made under the current round, a decision will be taken on the timing of the next call for applications. A key consideration in this regard will be the number of valid applications received that are considered worthy of a grant on this occasion. Furthermore, the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, and I will continue to make the case for enhanced investment in sport infrastructure, including greater funding for sports capital projects in the years ahead to ensure all of the objectives set out in the national sports policy are met.

The Deputy has referred to the "reopening" of the scheme but I am not quite sure if is talking about reopening what has been closed or reopening for new applications further down the line.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Perhaps a better way of putting it would have been to ask when another call for applications would be made with an additional budget. The applications already received come to €170 million, which is 170% of the budget. There will either be many very disappointed people and organisations or the Minister will have to consider extra funding over the next couple of years. There is also an issue with the spread of the applications, which are concentrated in particular areas. Some counties, such as Carlow, for example, have made no applications. The Minister cannot control that or direct people to apply to the scheme but an additional call would give some of those counties or areas that are under-represented an

additional opportunity to put in an application.

Will the Minister indicate the budget that will be granted for 2019 and 2020? Will there be a set amount for the next five or ten years, or will the process be kept open?

**Deputy Shane Ross:** The Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, and I will always push for additional funding for sports capital projects of this sort and we cannot rule out anything. We are certainly not ruling out anything in this way. There is clearly no intention to reopen the closed application process and I am glad the Deputy clarified that. We will certainly not rule out receiving more new applications for the large-scale capital fund process as it has attracted a great deal of public interest and a large number of applications. Some bodies were not ready to make an application and they may be ready to do it in the next two or three years.

If the Deputy is interested, I can describe the types of projects seeking funding. There were 23 applications for a multi-hall sport campus; 14 applications for swimming pools and leisure centres; 11 applications for stadium improvement and development, including in the Gaelic Athletics Association, Football Association of Ireland and Irish Rugby Football Union, etc.; six applications for sailing, rowing, kayaking and water sports; six applications for local club-based facilities; five applications for athletics facilities; four applications for centres of excellence; and three applications for boxing, squash and motorcycle facilities. The applications are being assessed and we hope to have a result towards the end of this year.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** This is a good initiative and perhaps it is a victim of its own success. As it stands, many worthwhile projects will lose out. The Minister itemised the kinds of projects being considered.

I am especially interested in the Cork Institute of Technology community sports project, the University College Cork sports park and the Munster rugby school of excellence. I hope the Minister will consider those. In any event, the major issue with the budget is that projects will be disappointed. It is a good initiative and there is scope to look at a subsequent call and additional budgetary allocation. As a side note, the Minister identified that some of the applications are for swimming pools, among other projects. I asked for this information per head of population in a parliamentary question and it was not possible to give that, but we lag behind some countries in that area.

*12 o'clock*

### Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The fast-track planning scheme, the strategic housing development scheme, has not delivered and is not delivering faster housing construction and it has de-democratised and undermined local input into our planning system. In an academic paper emanating from UCD and Queen's University, it is revealed that a group of developers essentially captured the then Minister, Deputy Coveney, and got him to include this initiative for a new planning procedure in the legislation. Developers co-operated with this research work. The developers met. The Minister rang them when he heard about the idea and he met them. They said that they gave him their recommendation and he took it lock, stock and barrel and put it into the new housing legislation. This is what is in the paper itself. Dr. Lorcan Sarr of Technological University Dublin makes the point that it shows how little strategic thinking

went into approving the strategic housing development process. A national Fine Gael politician commented on the research that given Fine Gael's predisposition to the market as the best way to solve the housing problem and as a principal policy objective, it was predisposed to this type of initiative. Alarming, one experienced architect told the researchers that from a developmental perspective, one of the great benefits of fast-track planning schemes is that they allow one to circumvent the development plan of the city or the county. Essentially, one can apply for a material contravention by the back door and that is a serious issue.

Maybe the Minister took the developers in good faith, as many in the House did. However, research by Killian Woods of *The Sunday Business Post* demonstrates that the fast-track planning scheme has not worked. No construction has commenced on more than 10,000 units that already have planning permission, which represents two thirds of all units that got permission. No construction has commenced in 47 of the 64 large housing developments granted fast-track permission. No construction has commenced on quite a number approved in 2018. Crucially, numerous sites with planning permission are currently advertised for sale. It seems the scheme has been used to get large-scale planning permission with a view to selling it on. That was not the intention. Half of the firms that received planning permission through the strategic housing development scheme in 2018 have not filed intent to commence construction.

Is the Taoiseach concerned at how naive the then Minister was and how his initiative lacked any strategic thinking within the Department underpinning it? He took on board lock, stock and barrel the developers' proposals and did not put in adequate protections. Does the Taoiseach accept that it has not resulted in faster construction of housing and that the combination of this measure with many of the high-density elements of the planning framework for 2040, with the reduced standards for apartments, is leading to a lopsided development landscape where co-living and build-to-rent is now the dominant preferred model? That is what is happening in our cities. Will the Government revert to greater local engagement and inputs and prevent, with legislation, this scheme from facilitating material contraventions of local development plans by the back door, which was never the original intention of the Oireachtas?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for the question. This policy and proposal was developed by the Tánaiste when he was Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in consultation with his officials. It is entirely reasonable that he would consult industry too when making a policy decision. The intention and idea behind it was to fast-track the planning system to make sure that builders who want to build houses that people need to buy, rent and live in could get planning permission more quickly. Instead of having to go through a two-step planning process of applying to the council, getting permission and then possibly having an appeal to An Bord Pleanála, if a builder was going to build 100 apartments, houses or homes, or more, that builder could go straight to An Bord Pleanála, thereby skipping one of the two steps. The idea behind that was to speed up the planning process to get planning permission more quickly and for houses to be built more quickly, therefore having more homes for people sooner. I thank Deputy Martin and his party for voting for the legislation that allowed that to happen. He neglected to mention that.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I did. I said that.

**The Taoiseach:** This proposal was put forward by the Tanáiste when he was Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government but it would not have been possible without Fianna Fáil's support for the housing policy, which I recognise.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I said that.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not sure if the figures I was given yesterday were authenticated or not but they indicated that approximately 16,000 homes have received planning permission under this fast-track planning process. Some 6,000 of those are either built or being built. Approximately 10,000 have yet to commence but they may yet commence in the next few months or the next year. There is always a time lag when building new homes or apartments. It does not just happen. One has to apply for planning permission, then go out to tender and then the home needs to be built and is occupied. That figure of 6,000 could be 7,000 to 10,000, or even higher, in the next couple of months. It is important that we assess policy changes since they are not always right and it is appropriate after two, three or four years to look back and see whether a policy was effective.

One has to consider the counterfactual, that if the builders had gone through the old process, through the council and An Bord Pleanála, and ask if the commencement rate would be any higher. Deputy Martin is assuming it would but has no evidence to back that up. He cannot assume it would be higher. If it is in the interests of landowners or builders to secure planning permissions to increase the value of their land, they can do that under the old process too. They can just as easily go to the council and get planning permission from 100 or 150 houses and still not build on it. It is reasonable to look at the counterfactual when considering whether a policy change or initiative worked, not just at what has happened. It is indisputable that there has been a considerable increase in the level of housing construction in the last years. Three or four years ago, almost no new homes were being built in Ireland. Some 20,000 new homes are now being built every year, with 45,000 new homes built since I became Taoiseach. We need to keep increasing that number towards 30,000 or 35,000 a year.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach has been in government since 2012, not just since he became Taoiseach, and he needs to take responsibility for that period too. The bottom line is that it has not resulted in faster construction. I have produced research. It is not my research but research from UCD, Queen's University and *The Sunday Business Post*, for which Killian Woods did much work to identify what got planning permission and what did not commence. Half of all developments that got planning permission in 2018 have not commenced. The whole purpose was to get construction up and running quickly-----

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Coveney):** It was not.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It was.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Coveney):** It was to get planning permission more quickly and the Deputy knows it.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I read the Minister's speech on the day and I have reread it. He rang the developers, all excited, and they came in. They gave him the plans and he took them lock, stock and barrel. That is what they tell the researchers.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** That is not what happened.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Quite a number of them told that to the researchers. The Minister accepted their proposals lock, stock and barrel. Some Fine Gael national politician who is very involved in housing told them that is the Fine Gael way, that Fine Gael believes in the market and that the market will solve the housing problem. It has not solved it and homelessness is far

worse since the Taoiseach became Taoiseach than with anybody else before that. The core point is that the county plans and city development plans are serious planning frameworks. They are being circumvented by the back door. Material contraventions have a bad name in this country and we are now facilitating them more easily than before through a back door mechanism.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is way over time.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach should be producing the alternative evidence, not just telling us to consider the counterfactual. The Taoiseach should have that evidence. This was raised yesterday by Deputy Boyd Barrett. I accept that the Oireachtas acted in good faith but we were wrong and we should now go back on the decision and revert to the local authority model. Builders on the ground have told me that they never had a problem with timelines under the local authority model but that capacity in An Bord Pleanála was always an issue. This issue needs to be revisited. The Taoiseach cannot remain in denial all of the time. He must listen to good quality research, whether it comes from academia or journalists, which points out failures in something which the Oireachtas, in good faith, believed would work but which, unfortunately, has not worked.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy. As I said earlier, it is entirely reasonable to look back on a policy change after three or four years to see if it was successful or not. We know that 16,000 homes were given fast-track planning permission through this process.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** They are not homes.

**The Taoiseach:** I need to study the research but I have not seen whether the authors looked at a counterfactual analysis or at whether developments that went through the old process commenced at a faster rate. The Deputy is right to point out that I have been in government since 2011 but he has been in government too. Let us not forget that. Let us not forget his party's record when it comes to housing. We know Fianna Fáil's record on housing.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** We built houses.

**The Taoiseach:** The reason we have a housing crisis in this country-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Fine Gael never built houses.

**The Taoiseach:** -----is that Fianna Fáil broke the banks and the construction industry and bankrupted the Government.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Deputy Martin is now keeping the Taoiseach in power.

**The Taoiseach:** We had a seven-year period during which almost no new homes were built in this State. There should have been approximately 200,000 houses built during that seven-year period, but none was built. That is why we have a housing crisis.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is not true.

**The Taoiseach:** The responsibility for that lies with the Deputy's party in government. It broke the banks, the construction industry and public policy.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Fianna Fáil in government built far more houses, even during the recession, than the Taoiseach's Government has built subsequently.

**The Taoiseach:** His party's record on housing is ghost estates, Priory Hall-----

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** This is the Trump way; say something even if it is not true and keep repeating it.

**The Taoiseach:** -----mica, pyrite, hundreds of thousands of people in negative equity, hundreds of thousands of people in mortgage arrears, and hundreds of thousands of construction workers forced to emigrate. That is his record.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Taoiseach has not brought many of them back.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Last year's crime figures make for very sobering reading. Right across the country, people are experiencing big problems with criminality and anti-social behaviour. People in towns and villages across rural Ireland live in fear of burglary and break-ins and this, in turn, has a devastating effect on community and family life. Knife and drug crime are now a daily concern and, indeed, a daily reality for people living in our cities. It is very sad that encountering crime has become normalised for so many of our citizens. It is not too much to ask to be able to walk safely down one's street or to be able to sleep soundly in one's bed. It is not too much to ask that young people can go out to enjoy themselves at night and come home safely.

All of us have the right to go about our business and our lives with a basic sense of security. I am sure the Taoiseach will agree. I will reflect on the realities of Dublin's north inner city. The figures reported today show that the crime rate for this area is five times higher than the national rate. As the Taoiseach knows well, the north inner city is home to the very finest of people, families and communities. They certainly do not deserve to be afflicted with, or to be worn down by, criminals and anti-social elements. The people of the north inner city should not have to constantly fight for the ownership of their communities. They should not live with the scourge of criminals who thrive on the misery and fear of families. I want to be very clear; crime is not unique to Dublin nor the north inner city. One only has to pick up a local newspaper in any part of the country to understand how crime impacts communities in every single county.

These figures raise very serious questions in respect of the resourcing of An Garda Síochána and raise serious questions of the Minister for Justice and Equality and of the Taoiseach, as Head of Government. It is clear that the north inner city deserves much better and that we need a more proactive approach not only in that part of the city, but right across the State. The Government cannot simply turn away. We need to agree that there is no acceptable level of crime anywhere. I am sure that when the Taoiseach saw these figures today he was just as shocked as I was. I am sure that he is as sincerely concerned for families in the north inner city as I am. Concern, however, will only go so far. We now need action. There are things the Taoiseach could do now, in the immediate term, that would help this community and others.

Why are we still waiting for the reopening of Fitzgibbon Street Garda station? It is still closed despite being situated in the area that has a crime rate five times higher than that of other areas across the State. Why was the north inner city community policing forum, which was the go-to place for the community to engage with An Garda Síochána, closed down last June? Will the Taoiseach commit to reopening this forum without delay? Will he tell us now when Fitzgibbon Street Garda station will be reopened?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy. It is worth acknowledging that we live in a country that

has a relatively low crime rate compared with other developed countries and we are fortunate to do so. In large part, that is down to the excellent work of An Garda Síochána every day of the week. Were it not for An Garda Síochána, we would not live in a country that has a low crime rate. I agree with the Deputy that there is no acceptable level of crime. I know the north inner city well. As the Deputy knows, I worked there for a period. I have visited on many occasions and still visit regularly. The area is full of great people and good communities. These people do not deserve to ever be victimised by criminals in their communities.

A British Prime Minister once said that the best policy approach to crime is to be tough on the causes of crime and to be tough on crime itself. I agree with that philosophy. When it comes to being tough on the causes of crime, we can see a key initiative being undertaken by the Government in the north-east inner city. It was started by my forebear, Deputy Enda Kenny, and subsequently continued. The Deputy has welcomed the initiative, with which she is very familiar. It is a good example of how Government, Government agencies and local authorities can come together to target an area of deprivation to help prevent future crimes.

We also need to be tough on crime, however. That is why, under my leadership since I became Taoiseach, An Garda Síochána has become better resourced than ever. Some €1.7 billion is allocated to An Garda Síochána every year, which is the biggest budget it has ever had. We have restored Garda recruitment with hundreds of extra gardaí being added to the force all the time. We are investing in vehicles, equipment and ICT and, led by the Garda Commissioner, we are reforming the organisation to ensure greater civilianisation to allow more gardaí to be on the street, where people want them, rather than in administrative positions behind desks. That is all under way and I am sure we will see demonstrable results.

With regard to the Deputy's specific question about Fitzgibbon Street Garda station, the Government has committed to reopening the station as part of the plan for the north-east inner city. I do not know why it has not been opened yet or what the timelines are, but I will find out and get back to the Deputy. I will do the same with regard to the policing forum.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I agree with the Taoiseach that it is not only about zero tolerance for crime and criminality but also zero tolerance for poverty, exclusion and the scourge of addiction. On that point we agree. It is beyond explanation that we are still waiting for Fitzgibbon Street Garda station to be reopened when it is located in the area with the highest crime rate in the State. Frankly, it is beyond belief that, in June, the Government closed the community policing forum in an area with a crime rate five times higher than the average rate in the State. The Taoiseach may say he is pulling out all the stops and doing all he can, but people and families living in the area with the highest crime rate - five times the State average - see a Garda station in the heart of this area that is still closed. They know their community policing forum was closed down as recently as June. Therefore, I want the Taoiseach to provide more concrete explanations and, more important solutions. We need a date for the reopening of Fitzgibbon Street Garda station. We need to know that the community policing forum will be reopened. Anything short of that will, to the ears of the families of those living in the north inner city, sound very much like rhetoric and crocodile tears. It will add nothing to their sense of safety and security in their home area.

May I say, just before the Taoiseach responds, that-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up.

2 October 2019

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----the Ceann Comhairle allowed Deputy Micheál Martin to run over by one minute and 11 seconds?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It was one minute and five seconds.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It was not; it was one minute and 11 seconds.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy surpassed himself.

**The Taoiseach:** I promise not to overrun.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government has committed to reopening Fitzgibbon Street Garda station. I do not know the reason for the delay. I will find out and get back to the Deputy in the next 48 hours. It will be reopened. It is not the opening of Garda stations that reduces crime, rather it is gardaí on the streets. The number on the streets has increased not only in Dublin but also all over the rest of the State. It will continue to increase for as long as this Government is in office and I am the head of it.

I will check the position on the community policing forum. The Deputy's suggestion was that the Government somehow closed it down. I can guarantee that if there were a Government decision to close down a community policing forum, I would know about it. Therefore, it was not a Government decision. I will find out who closed the forum and why, and I will get back to the Deputy on it.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I will stay within my time allocation, as is normal. The Comptroller and Auditor General has analysed the cost of the bank bailout in his annual report for 2018. The Taoiseach will recall, as will the House, that my party opposed the bank bailout, which was supported by the Taoiseach's party, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin. The cost of the bank bailout, set out by the Comptroller and Auditor General, was €64 billion. This year, many years after the bailout, gross voted current and capital expenditure together, or everything we spend on vital infrastructure in hospitals and schools and on social protection, is €66 billion. The amount we gave to bail out the banks is almost equal to that. The figure of €66 million is the amount we voted in this House this year to run every Department of State and everything we will spend on buildings and infrastructure. It is truly a staggering sum of money. We will get a portion of it back through dividends and from the sale of bank shares. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General estimates that the net cost to the people of Ireland will still remain at €45 billion, with a recurring cost of between €1.1 billion and €1.3 billion every year to repay the interest on the money borrowed to bail out the banks. Bank of Ireland required a smaller bailout and has repaid the taxpayers' investment in it. The report of the Comptroller and Auditor General concludes, however, that none of the other banks will repay the money given by the people of Ireland. At the same time, the banks are profitable and there is pressure on the Government to remove the cap of €500,000 on bankers' pay. I hope and believe that the Taoiseach understands that most people would find any such suggestion repulsive.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report suggests that we need to introduce new ways for the banks to repay the money the people put into them. In our budget proposals, which will be published tomorrow, we will suggest a modest increase of the bank levy to recover an additional €250 million. The levy is currently scheduled to end in 2021, which clearly cannot be tolerated. Does the Taoiseach agree that the banking sector owes a huge debt to the people

and that we, as Members of the Irish Parliament, should demand that the banks continue to pay through levies until the debt and interest are fully paid back to the people?

**The Taoiseach:** I absolutely agree with the Deputy that the banking sector owes a huge debt to the people but he might be getting his history a little muddled. With respect, he is confusing the bank guarantee with the bank bailout. It is indeed the case that his party opposed the bank guarantee. There were two bank bailouts, however. There was the bailout carried out by Fianna Fáil when in government with the Green Party, namely, that relating to Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide. We will never see that money again because the institutions in question were dead and should not have been bailed out. I opposed that bailout and so did the Deputy's party. There was a second bank bailout, namely, that relating to Allied Irish Banks and Bank of Ireland. Not only did the Deputy not oppose this, he supported it. He was the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform at the time and probably signed the cheque. That was the bank bailout he supported. It happened when the Fine Gael–Labour Party Government was in office; that is a fact. That bailout was correct because Allied Irish Banks and Bank of Ireland are functioning, surviving, living banks. It made sense to save them. They were the pillar banks of the Irish economy at the time. It was necessary to protect people's savings and to continue to have banks that could lend to businesses and issue mortgages.

As the Deputy pointed out, Bank of Ireland has already repaid all the money the State put into it. I believe that Allied Irish Banks will do this also. How will it be done? It will be done through dividends being paid to the Exchequer. That is happening through the bank levy, which the Deputy mentioned, and also through the sale of shares. Already, 25% of Allied Irish Banks has been sold and that has brought billions of euro back for the Exchequer. In due course, and at the right time, the rest will be sold also. That will enable us to recover the money that was put into Allied Irish Banks. The bank bailout of Allied Irish Banks and Bank of Ireland made sense and the money will be recovered. Unfortunately, the money involved in the shameful bailout of Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide will never be recovered.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** This is the first time that the Taoiseach's memory of history has been a bit shaky or reconstructed.

**The Taoiseach:** Really, no.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** The bottom line is simply that the pivotal moment in history was the voting on the bank guarantee. The Taoiseach and his party supported the bank guarantee. That was the point of no return.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Which resulted in the two bailouts.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** That is when the indebtedness of the banks was put on the back of the taxpayer. The Taoiseach can grimace as much as he likes but that is the reality. Many regret the decision. As we know, the State was under pressure from the European Central Bank because of potential contagion but the decision was wrong. The Taoiseach confuses it with the recapitalising of the banks that were then in public control. There was no going back on that. We needed to recapitalise the banks or the banking system would have collapsed. The problem now is how to recoup the money. We may have debates about the history but we must ask how we can recoup the people's money? The Taoiseach is stating that we are going to get it back but the Comptroller and Auditor General says otherwise. He says there will be a deficit of €45 billion. I am asking the Taoiseach a very straightforward and simple question. Does he believe

all the money invested by the people of Ireland into the banking system should be recouped? The levies should be maintained until the money is recouped. Does the Taoiseach agree that the cap on bankers' pay of €500,000 should remain?

**The Taoiseach:** I am of the view that the cap on bankers' pay should remain in place. I have said that previously. We have recovered all the money from Bank of Ireland. We will in time recover all the money from Allied Irish Banks. It will not be possible to recover the money that was put into Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide because those institutions were dead. I do not believe anyone will ever know for sure whether the decision to guarantee the banks on the fateful night in question was right or wrong. One should bear in mind why it was made, however. It was to protect the deposits and savings of the Irish people. Those banks were bust; they were empty. Had it not been for a guarantee-----

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** The Taoiseach supported it.

**The Taoiseach:** I did. I am explaining the decision now. Those banks were bust and the consequence of the guarantee was to protect the savings of Irish people and Irish businesses. In countries where a different course of action was followed, such as Iceland and Cyprus, it was not just the bondholders who lost their money. Savers did also. That is what would have happened here.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I too want to raise what I believe to be the scandal of the strategic housing development scheme. I raised it with the Taoiseach yesterday. We put in a submission to the review weeks ago calling for the scheme to be scrapped. Before the summer, a People Before Profit motion calling for the scheme to be scrapped was passed by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. This motion was proposed in light of Bartra's absolutely disgraceful strategic housing scheme in Dún Laoghaire, which involves 210 units of little box rooms with fold-out beds but no social or affordable housing. Our opposition to this scheme has now been confirmed by the revelations in an article in *The Sunday Business Post* at the weekend and by the studies carried out in UCD and elsewhere. It has clearly emerged that the strategic housing development scheme was dreamed up by developers. The Minister who put it forward needs to explain how it is being claimed by developers that he took their plans on board - lock, stock and barrel - and stuck them into the housing Bill. It is now clear that this scheme is nothing more than a licence for property speculators to speculate, to hoard land, to flip land and to print money. It is not delivering what the Minister promised when he introduced the Bill. He said it would deliver housing to address the housing emergency that has developed after the Minister's eight years in government.

We all know the sins of Fianna Fáil and of those who put money into bailing out the rotten and toxic banks, instead of putting it into housing and other public services and forms of infrastructure. We are now paying the cost of that. We need answers. Is it the case, as the developers are claiming, that this Bill was dreamed up by them for them? It is enriching them, while failing to deliver the affordable housing that is needed to address the housing crisis. Two thirds of the houses or apartments that have been approved under this scheme have not commenced. Some of them are for sale. In such cases, it is absolutely clear that properties are being flipped. When planning permission is provided under the fast-track strategic housing scheme, the value of the asset held by the property developer is inflated. This encourages the developer to flip it on and make a lot of money. We know that speculation and hoarding by developers is rampant at the moment. The Minister has said that the delivery of housing has improved, but all the experts are saying we need 35,000 housing units at this stage if we are to catch up with the deficit.

We are nowhere near that, but we have the scandal of this scheme failing. Rather than building public and affordable housing on public land, which is what some of us have been asking it to do for five or six years, the Government is continuing to expect profit-driven property speculators to solve the housing crisis when all they are doing is exploiting it.

**The Taoiseach:** I think I answered this question yesterday and today. Perhaps I can elaborate a little on what I said earlier. The purpose of the strategic housing development scheme is to speed up the planning process. If somebody wants to build an apartment block or a housing estate, there is a two-step process. When one submits a planning application to the council, people can make observations on it. The decision that is made by the council can be appealed to An Bord Pleanála, and the whole process happens all over again. The idea behind the strategic housing development scheme is a sensible and logical one. It allows somebody who is building 100 homes or more to skip one step in the process and go straight to An Bord Pleanála. The purpose of it was to fast-track the planning process to cut weeks or months off the time it takes to build new homes. That is the intention behind it. As the Deputy has pointed out, some 16,000 new homes have been granted permission under the scheme. Some 6,000 of them are under construction. The other 10,000 homes are not yet under construction, but they could well come into construction over the next year.

**Deputy John Lahart:** They are not homes.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** They are not homes.

**Deputy John Lahart:** They are units.

**The Taoiseach:** They are houses and apartments, or whatever the Deputies want to call them.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** They are studios that are built to be rented out.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** It is a tiny percentage.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It is not.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The Deputy is playing politics.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I am not.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy is making two assumptions that may not be correct. First, he is assuming that if the developers had gone through the old two-step process, somehow these dwellings - homes, houses or whatever you want to call them - would be under construction. He is assuming that, but he does not have evidence to back it up. Second, he is saying that landowners and builders use the fast-track planning process to get planning permission for their land in order to increase its value. That may well be the case, but they could have done that anyway through the old process of applying to the council and getting permission for 150 units, thereby adding to the value of the land. The two assumptions made by the Deputy are not backed up by evidence. The Department has carried out a review. When any new policy decision is made or any new scheme is launched, it is sensible to review it after two or three years to see how it is going. In the coming weeks, the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, will be in a position to bring the review that has been carried out by the Department to the Cabinet and to make it public.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We have proposed a solution. We have called for the

scheme to be scrapped. We have pointed out that nothing in the scheme guarantees that there will be any - any - affordable or public housing, as we witnessed with the Bartra proposal at Eblana Avenue with no social and affordable housing but box rooms. The strategic housing development application at Cross Avenue in Blackrock involved apartments that would cost €1 million each, in effect. This would be completely unaffordable for the local authority, even if there was 10% social housing. What is the point in that? What is the point in giving fast-track planning permission for housing which, even if it is constructed, is totally unaffordable and totally unsuitable, does nothing to address the housing crisis and may not even deliver social housing? There is no point in doing that. When the Government introduced this legislation, we were told it would help to address the housing crisis. That was the central context and was why people did not oppose it at the time. Now it is becoming clear that it is not doing that.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** What about the 6,000 homes?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is not delivering housing at all in many cases. There is evidence that sites are being sold on after planning permission has been obtained. Rather than delivering affordable housing, this scheme is facilitating flipping, speculating and hoarding. We are calling on the Taoiseach to scrap it because it is being used and abused by property speculators. The Government must start do what we called for all along, even at the time of the legislation, namely to build public and affordable housing on public land on the scale that was done in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. The Government seems to claim it cannot be done in the 21st century. We do not believe the Taoiseach. The developers are telling the Government what to do.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for his follow-up question. This fast-track planning process has already resulted in 6,000 new homes being built, with another 10,000 to come. They are some of the 45,000 new homes that have been built since I became Taoiseach.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** They are not all homes.

**The Taoiseach:** There is already a one-step planning process for social housing. It is called Part 8. It is not necessary to bring in a one-step planning process for social housing because that already exists and has existed for many decades. Only private housing had to go through the two-step process. There is a one-step process for social housing, and it is called Part 8. We are now well into the biggest social housing programme in decades. We are doing what the Deputy called for. We are adding approximately 10,000 new units to the social housing stock every year.

**Deputy John Lahart:** How many of them are private?

**The Taoiseach:** Having come from a base of almost nothing, we are now up to over 10,000 every year. The vast majority of them are new-builds by local authorities and housing associations.

## **Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask Deputies to adhere to the one-minute rule.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** My question relates to legislation on the fast-track housing scheme. A leading contributor to the research in this area, who is an architect and public commentator, has told researchers that from a development perspective, the scheme essentially allows one to circumvent the development plan on the basis that if one can go directly to the board, one can apply for material contravention by the back door. It also means that development plans are a bit of a waste of time because with all of the preparation, the public consultation debate, input from local councillors one is not bound to it. This is a very serious insight into how the scheme has worked out. I am saying that it needs to be changed legislatively. Local area development plans, county development plans and city development plans must be respected and given legislative underpinning. In the context of the review that is under way, will the Government agree to legislate for the underpinning of county and city development plans?

**Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy):** It is important to note that there is already a pre-consultation phase that involves the local authority.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It does not.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** There is room for the public to intervene.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It does not involve the local authority.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** It does.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It does not.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** It has to involve the local authority.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** It involves a few officials and technocrats engaging with one another. The Minister needs to get real.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The Deputy should listen to the Minister.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** He should talk to the residents on the ground.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I am afraid the Deputy is incorrect.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** He is detached and disconnected.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** I have been a councillor. I speak to the local authorities every day as part of my job. The Deputy does not understand what is happening.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Talk to the residents.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** He will be misinforming the Dáil if he continues in that line.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will Members for God's sake please do this in a calm and rational way? Deputy Micheál Martin asked the Minister a question and should allow him to answer.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Deputy Micheál Martin, who is a party leader, is playing constituency politics.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Actually, Cork has the least-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Tánaiste's intervention is not helpful. He should let the Min-

ister answer.

**Deputy Eoghan Murphy:** To be brief, after two years of operation of the fast-track housing process which I signed into law in 2017, the review is now complete. I will bring it to Cabinet and lay it before the Oireachtas. Changes will be made.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Yesterday, I raised with the Taoiseach the chronic overcrowding in our hospitals. I echoed the concerns of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, which has told us that this crisis is putting patient care at risk and has described the situation as being beyond unsustainable. Today, we woke to the news that University Hospital Limerick has 82 patients without beds, the highest figure ever recorded in any hospital. In September, over 1,400 patients in Limerick were without beds. Today, it breaks the record for the number of people on trolleys. Yesterday, the Taoiseach said it was not simply a matter of beds. The issue in Limerick today is a simple matter of capacity and beds. Yesterday, the Taoiseach, quite correctly apologised. The reality is, however, that an apology is not enough. What is his plan for University Hospital Limerick? It is a disgraceful hospital in terms of the record-breaking number of people on trolleys.

**The Taoiseach:** The official figures provided by the HSE for Limerick are 38, but as the Deputy knows there is often a dispute between the figures produced by the INMO and those produced by the HSE. Whether the figure is 38 or 82 is beside the point. There should not be that level of overcrowding in University Hospital Limerick. The hospital has had enormous investment under this Government. It has a new state-of-the-art emergency department, which is one of the finest in the country. It has a new wing, the Leben wing, which is fully open and occupied, and has 25 new beds. A further 60 are under construction and should be open in the next couple of weeks. Another 96-bed block is planned.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** The Government established an escrow account to hold the Apple fine money of €14.3 billion. The National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, and the Comptroller and Auditor General estimate that the account will lose €70 million per annum because of negative interest rates due to the way it was set up. Since the Government's plan is to hand back the money to Apple, is it its intention that the taxpayer should pony up the additional €70 million per annum currently being lost as a result of the way the account was set up? The latter is a sum which could be used to build seven schools or 350 houses every year, on top of the €3.9 million in set-up fees for the account and whatever consultancy fees are ongoing.

**The Taoiseach:** As I understand it, Apple put €14 billion or so into the escrow account. The account is currently losing money because of negative interest rates. It may well gain money should interest rates become positive again. We do not know what will happen. Nobody can predict the future because we do not know when the court's decision will be made or what will happen to interest rates in the meantime. We can only guess; we cannot know for certain. If the money goes back to Apple, as the Deputy suggests it might, then it will lose the other money to which he refers.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I have seen many mean Government cutbacks in my day, but one of the meanest of all has to be that involving the decision to axe the rehabilitative training allowance of €31.80 per week which was mainly used by young school leavers with disabilities to go to training centres. When the Government axed the allowance, it also axed the travel and lunch money of those young people. There is outrage among trainees and staff in the National Learning Network Centre in Hollyhill, County Cork, and similar centres across the country. Will the

Government reverse this cutback and bring in the necessary legislation to do so?

**The Taoiseach:** I do not think Deputy Barry has the correct information. The payment has not been axed. Anyone who was receiving the payment still receives it. However, new entrants to rehabilitation programme are no longer eligible for it. There was an inequality, in that some people were in receipt of the allowance while others who were doing similar courses elsewhere were not. It is not a cutback. The money is being reallocated.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** The Taoiseach is splitting hairs.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy always shouts a Minister down when he knows that he himself as not quite told the full truth. The €3.7 million being saved due to this change is being put back into disability services, specifically to provide 140 additional full day placements for people with disabilities who need them and 370 enhanced day places. The reallocation is ending an inequality and putting more money into services.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I would like to thank the Attorney General for his decision to reopen the inquest into the Stardust tragedy of 1981. It is to be hoped it will bring peace, closure and justice to all of the families affected, whom the Taoiseach met in recent months.

I refer to Hong Kong, the Uighur nation and China. Are Ireland and its European partners afraid of the dictatorship which celebrated China's 70th anniversary yesterday? Given the clear desire of the people of Hong Kong to live in a democracy rather than under a dictatorship and in light of the savage repression of the Uighur nation in north-west China, where 2 million men are incarcerated in concentration camps, surely we cannot take a country which carries out such brutal repression seriously?

**The Tánaiste:** Our relationship with China is one of constant engagement. We have good and regular engagement with the Chinese embassy in Dublin and raise a spectrum of issues, including those relating to human rights, on a regular basis.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Special needs education should be close to all of our hearts. Children were due to start in a wonderful school, Scoil Aonghusa, on 16 September. Siobhan Lyons is a parent who is very concerned that her son Ryan has not been able to start school due to problems organising special needs assistants, SNAs. It is pointless having classrooms and extra pupils when no extra SNAs have been provided. The school has a wonderful board of management, parents and council. The situation is farcical. Bridget Duggan, another parent, contacted me to say she received a letter stating the school had been given no extra allocation of SNAs to meet the increase in numbers. The principal of the school, Siobhán Keyes-Ryan, wrote to the parents involved. She is trying to do her best to resolve the matter. The school is not getting SNAs on time. Special education needs organisers are doing their best but do not have funding. It is not fair or right that children with special needs should be subjected to this kind of unfair and discriminatory treatment. Where is the Constitution and the promise to cherish all our children equally? The Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, needs to deal with this issue. Scoil Chormaic and Scoil Aonghusa are wonderful institutions but they need support.

**The Taoiseach:** At the Deputy knows, the number of SNAs has been dramatically increased by this Government. We now invest as much in special needs education as we do in higher education, and there has been a significant increase in resources in that area. I do not have any information on the schools the Deputy mentioned. If the Deputy wants to raise the matter with

the Minister for Education and Skills, I am sure he will provide him with a detailed reply.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Minister for Health met the family at the centre of the crisis in the National Maternity Hospital on 29 August, which I welcome. This is the case where a healthy baby was aborted under the Government's legislation, under the section concerning life-limiting conditions and fatal foetal abnormalities. It is a heartbreaking situation. The mother has said she was examined by only one obstetrician. In that meeting, the Minister acknowledged that the medical notes indicated that the legislation was breached and it was also accepted by officials that a case such as this could be a case for the Garda. Shockingly, over six months on the family has still not had an input into the composition of the panel.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am sorry to interrupt the Deputy, but I am deeply uncomfortable about the raising of a specific matter of this nature which may be the subject of litigation or inquiry. It is not the appropriate-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is not the subject of litigation. The problem is that there is a request for a review and the family have had no input into the composition of the panel or the terms of reference. The Government is refusing the family the opportunity to input into that process. Six months on, it is not good enough.

**The Taoiseach:** I too am reluctant to discuss in the Chamber the medical history of any individual or anything of that nature.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The family asked me to raise this issue.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not have information on the medical history of any individual patient.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It would be more appropriate for Deputy Tóibín to engage with the Minister for Health on the matter.

**The Taoiseach:** I think so.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I wish to again raise the matter of the hare netting and coursing licence which has been refused or suspended by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan. The people of County Kerry and other rural dwellers feel wrongly disenfranchised by a Dublin-based Minister who also prevented the cutting of hedgerows in August. They believe that the Minister does not understand the amount of money and care they have invested in the dog industry or the love they have for the dogs. They are outraged by the demand of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, that coursing and the greyhound industry be taken off Fáilte Ireland.

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

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** The Minister, Deputy Ross, has done enough harm to the people of rural Ireland. I ask the Taoiseach to remove him from office. I ask Fianna Fáil to demand his removal. They are supporting him.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy should resume his seat. Please, do not be disorderly.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** It is time for him to go. The people of County Kerry want to get rid of him.

**The Taoiseach:** The Minister, Deputy Madigan, addressed this matter yesterday during

Topical Issues. I am advised that the first ever positive test for the rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus 2 in the Irish wild hare population was recorded in late July and, as a consequence of that, on 9 August the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht temporarily suspended the licence until the extent of the virus is established. The virus could wipe out the entire Irish hare population and, for that reason, the suspension of licences will continue. The coursing community is concerned as the netting of hares needs to take place now in order that the 2019-20 coursing season can start in October.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** One hare has been found to have the disease and that was in dubious circumstances.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I refer to page 38 of the programme for Government, dealing with infrastructure. The Adare bypass will form part of the Limerick-Foynes motorway. Adare Manor has been confirmed as the host of the 2026 Ryder Cup. I was led to believe that the planning application for the bypass was to go to An Bord Pleanála and that the environmental impact assessment and, possibly, compulsory purchase orders were to be published in the near future, subject to Cabinet approval. Has the matter been tabled to be brought before Cabinet? If so, when? I ask that it be prioritised given that it was expected to be done in October, having been delayed from March.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the important issue of the Adare bypass. The Government is very keen to get the project done not just because of the Ryder Cup, but also in order that the beautiful town of Adare can be freed from congestion and people can travel to and from County Kerry more quickly than is currently the case. The bypass is included in Project Ireland 2040. I do not know the cause of any delay. The matter does not need to come to Cabinet until it is at business case stage. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Ross, to provide the Deputy with an up-to-date briefing.

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** All Members are anticipating the budget next week. I hope the Ministers for Finance and Health will be cognisant that next week is mental health week and next Thursday is World Mental Health Day. Page 5 of the programme for Government includes a commitment on mental health which recognises that early intervention is crucial. All Members are aware that 2,440 children and young people are on the CAMHS waiting list and more than 7,000 young children are awaiting primary care psychology services. The number of children being treated in adult institutions continues to rise. It stood at 68 in 2016, reached 82 in 2018 and stands at more than 40 so far this year. What are the Ministers for Finance and Health going to do to address this shameful situation?

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly):** I cannot speak for the Minister for Finance ahead of the budget. On mental health, I agree with the Deputy that early intervention is the way forward. I have prioritised investment in that area since taking up this job two years ago. There has been an increase of more than €300 million in funding for mental health, bringing the total allocation to more than €1 billion last year. The Deputy specifically referred to the CAMHS waiting list. We introduced 114 assistant psychologists and 20 psychologists to work with young people at primary care level in order to prevent them having to escalate into the very specialist CAMHS service. We are pursuing several other initiatives which I do not have time to detail now. I am happy to discuss the matter with the Deputy in any forum.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** In February, the Minister of State with responsibility for disabil-

ity issues, Deputy Finian McGrath, stated that the Government was committed to providing a range of accessible respite care supports for people with a disability and their families. He also stated that respite care was crucial in helping to reduce family stress, preserve the family unit and provide stability. In direct contradiction of those words, the HSE unilaterally decided to close Sruthan House, a respite facility in Dundalk. I met users of the facility. They and their families feel very strongly about this closure and I support them. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, to ensure that Sruthan House is protected and that the excellent service it provides will continue?

**The Taoiseach:** An extra €10 million was provided in the budget for this year to provide additional respite care which is so important for families and carers. It allowed an additional respite house to be opened in each community healthcare region. I do not know the circumstances of the particular closure to which the Deputy referred, but I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, to engage with him on it.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** The reintroduction of CLÁR funding was flagged in the programme for Government. On recent announcements relating to CLÁR funding, Cork County Council was given an understanding by the Department of Rural and Community Development that it would have to prioritise 15 projects. It submitted 15 projects, having consulted communities and prioritised the funding needed in various parts of the county. Only three projects in the entire local authority area were funded, with Cork county receiving €115,000 or 3% of the total allocation of €3.8 million. There was negotiation between the Department and the local authority on projects in Lyre, Millstreet and Knocknagree, as well as on a playground for Kanturk. Those behind the projects were assured by the Department that funding would be allocated if the projects were prioritised by the local authority. Why has the funding evaporated? Are there plans to make additional funding available for the Cork County Council area?

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Canney):** I will check the specific figures for Cork county. Generally, there has been pressure on CLÁR agencies or development companies to get their projects in place and the funding spent. We are following that up. If there is a specific problem in Cork, we will deal with it.

**Deputy John Brady:** More than €202 million has been given to the private companies, Turas Nua and Seetec, to roll out what can only be described as the failed JobPath programme. To date, more than 232,000 citizens have been referred to JobPath, some of them for the fourth year in succession. I refer to “failed” JobPath because only 6%, or approximately 15,000, of those people have been sustained in employment for 12 months or more. The House was told that referrals were due to stop this year, but a decision was taken to continue referrals to the JobPath programme for another 12 months. What is the reason for that decision? Why has the Government decided to ignore the will of this Dáil, which voted in February 2019 to stop referrals immediately to the failed JobPath programme?

**Deputy Eamon Scanlon:** The Dáil made a decision to end referrals to JobPath earlier this year. I am not questioning the competency of the people providing the service but it has failed, of that there is no question. Some €150 million has been spent on this scheme and we have, as Deputy Brady said, a 6% success rate for people holding down a job after one year. If we compare it to the community employment CE schemes, the participants taking part in them get satisfaction from what they do. The people in the communities are very happy with the work they are doing. Recently, CE scheme supervisors were told the number of participants on their

projects at week eight will automatically become their approved number for those 52 weeks.

**Deputy Willie O’Dea:** It is a cut.

**Deputy Eamon Scanlon:** That means if a participant becomes ill, has to leave a scheme to care for somebody or gets a job, that place on the scheme will be lost. Therefore, it is a cut. That is not right, given that the CE schemes are working compared to the other schemes mentioned.

**The Taoiseach:** I will have to defer to the Minister, Deputy Regina Doherty, to provide the Deputy with an answer regarding the CE schemes.

On JobPath, all I would say is that by any objective analysis this Government’s employment policies have been a resounding success. There are 2.3 million people at work in Ireland, more people than ever before, unemployment is below 5% and long-term unemployment is even lower at around 2%, one of the lowest in the world. JobPath has been part of achieving that, as have CE schemes, the local employment service, LES, and the Intreo programme.

I am advised, although I may be incorrect, the decision to continue with JobPath for a period relates to our concerns that should there be a no-deal Brexit we may see a rise in unemployment and long-term unemployment and will need that capacity.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I would like to raise the issue of capacity in our hospitals. Today we learned from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, there are 556 people waiting for a bed in an acute hospital, whether it be in an emergency department, on corridors or in wards. Yesterday I received a reply from the HSE regarding late discharges and we learned that up to 24 September this year there were 55,000 late discharges, which is equivalent to approximately 1,500 per week. We are at a crisis level in our capacity to cope before we even see the winter surge. If we could deal with the late discharges, it could free up capacity in the accident and emergency departments. What steps will the Government take to try to ensure we can deal with late discharges? There is no doubt that if we could free up capacity at the end of a person’s stay in hospital when they are fit and deemed ready to go home, it would free up capacity in accident and emergency departments. Special emphasis should be put on addressing this issue.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I thank the Deputy for her continued interest in and focus on this area. As she and the House will be aware, we commissioned an independent report into this matter approximately 12 months ago. I chair an implementation group in the Department of Health overlooking specifically what we now call late transfers of care. A number of different options will come onstream to try to deal with this issue. We recognise the current situation is due to there having been a backlog in the fair deal scheme for a number of weeks but those figures are working their way through the system. Additional investment was made on 9 September which will see those figures come down again. However, with respect to the medium term, I have always made the point that trolleys should be at the other end of the health system. Trolleys should be for people waiting to leave hospital rather than waiting to get in, but that is an aside. We are making significant progress. I do not have enough time to go into it in detail with the Deputy but I am happy to have that conversation with her in a forum on some structural changes that will address the issue of delayed transfers of care.

**Deputy Margaret Murphy O’Mahony:** The fishing industry is of major importance to the economy of Cork South-West. It is our obligation to protect the fishing industry in general. Brexit has the potential to have a detrimental effect on the fishing industry as 60% of our total

mackerel catch and 40% of our lobster catch are caught in UK waters. Has the Taoiseach any plans to set up a mitigation fund to protect the fishing industry?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy is correct, a no-deal Brexit next month could have a very profound impact on our fishing industry. As she pointed out, about 35% of the Irish catch is taken from UK waters and that would be lost to us in the event of a no deal and perhaps vessels from other countries that currently fish in UK waters may be displaced into our waters, so this is a matter of real concern for Government.

The European Commission is proposing even in the event of a no-deal the current arrangements should continue in place at least until the end of this calendar year. Unfortunately, the UK Government is not signed up to that at this stage. However, as part of our response to a no-deal, there will need to be special and exceptional support for the fishing industry. The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, should be in a position to outline that on budget day.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Rowing Ireland has been the most progressive and successful sporting organisation during the past number of years in this country. We need only think of the glory Gary and Paul O'Donovan have brought to Skibbereen, west Cork and Ireland on many occasions in recent years. They, along with Jake, Shane, Mark and Sanita as well as other rowers throughout the country have had us standing on our feet in awe of their achievements.

Other countries are investing €1 million per boat if they want to win an Olympic gold medal. Ireland's aid to Rowing Ireland is currently €600,000 in total, which leaves families having to pay thousands of euro out of their own pockets to ensure their children, neighbours or friends can compete. The upcoming budget is an ideal opportunity to address this massive shortfall and to give these great sportspeople an opportunity to give 100% to their sport and not to be fundraising for it. Will the Government increase Rowing Ireland's budget this year?

**The Taoiseach:** There was a considerable increase in funding for sport in last year's budget. It was around 12% or 13%. I am not sure we will be able to do as well as that for next year but I am confident there will be a further increase. However, the decision on how that is allocated to individual national governing bodies is made by Sport Ireland and not by Government.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** The Taoiseach and I have had the opportunity to speak about Seán Lemass previously and about his vision for this country and for education, and the Taoiseach said he is a great admirer of him. Seán Lemass had a big focus on primary school education. Page 86 of the programme for Government refers to education being the key to giving every child an equal opportunity in life. There are three areas I would like to mention in terms of investing for the best in primary education. Currently, our primary school class sizes are the biggest in the eurozone, being five above the EU average. We need to support school leaders by giving one management day per week to teaching principals and we need the restoration of positions of management. Currently, capitation grants are 14% less than they were ten years ago. Schools are struggling. They are very much underfunded which puts pressure back on parents. I would like to see some improvement in those areas. Obviously, next week is a big occasion for all of us but I would appreciate a response.

**The Taoiseach:** I agree with the Deputy's sentiments. Education is the great leveller and opportunity giver. Therefore, it is right we invest in it. The budget for education this year is €11 billion, the biggest ever budget for education since the foundation of the State. I am confident that the budget for next year will be bigger again. However, whether it gets allocated to the

particular priorities the Deputy mentioned is a matter for the Minister for Education and Skills to decide on when he gets the budget for his Department, which he not yet got. Hopefully, we can give the Deputy a better answer in a few weeks.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Commitments were made to the healthcare service in the programme for Government. I am speaking on behalf of healthcare workers in Kerry. I am referring to the people who work in kitchens, healthcare assistants, nurses, doctors and consultants in hospitals such as Caherciveen and in Killarney town, where we need new community hospitals, and University Hospital Kerry, where we need more beds to cater for the ever-increasing number of patients who attend that hospital. Those excellent people are under tremendous personal pressure in trying to do their work every day. They put their hearts and souls into their commitment to their jobs. I ask HSE management, I am specifically talking about HSE management in Cork, to realise the people in Kerry are working extremely diligently in trying to deliver a proper healthcare service. We need more assistance from those in management. I want them to realise there is more to the healthcare service in that area than just Cork. Kerry exists and I want to make sure the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health and the managers in the HSE remember that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I would say the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, is very familiar with Kerry.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** We remember every July that Kerry exists.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I can assure the Deputy there is no neglect of Kerry or no desire to neglect the facilities in Kerry. He mentioned some community hospitals about which he is concerned. We are currently undertaking a programme of refurbishment of them. There are 90 community hospitals. We have committed by 2021 to have them refurbished and brought up to standard. Many of those are in Kerry. There is a budget this year of €220 million to ensure that happens. I can guarantee the Deputy there is no neglect of the facilities in Kerry.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seven Deputies were not reached today and will be given priority tomorrow.

## **Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)**

### **Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements**

1. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting with US Vice President, Mike Pence; and if the ramifications of a hard Brexit on the island of Ireland were discussed. [37405/19]

2. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if the matter of the undocumented Irish was discussed with US Vice President, Mike Pence, when they met recently. [37412/19]

3. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting with the US Vice President, Mike Pence. [37445/19]

4. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his contact and engagements with the US Vice President, Mr. Mike Pence, during his recent visit here. [37286/19]

5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with the US Vice President, Mr. Mike Pence. [37384/19]

6. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with the US Vice President, Mr. Mike Pence. [38501/19]

7. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting with the US Vice President. [39682/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 7, inclusive, together.

On Tuesday, 3 September, I met the Vice President of the United States, Mike Pence, at Farmleigh House. He was on an official visit to Ireland, marking the latest in a series of high-level visits this year by the most senior figures in US politics, including President Trump and the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi.

Preceding our meeting, I was pleased to host the Vice President, the Second Lady, his mother and sister for lunch.

The Vice President and I, accompanied by officials, then held a bilateral meeting at which we discussed a range of issues of mutual interest, including US-Ireland bilateral relations, economic relations, Brexit and Northern Ireland. We also discussed international trade, including the prospects for an EU-US trade agreement.

Our discussion on economic relations focused on the two-way trading relationship between the US and Ireland. We welcomed the fact that trade between the US and Ireland is valued at in excess of €2 billion per week, with over 100,000 American workers employed by Irish-owned firms right across the United States, and 150,000 workers employed in Ireland by US-owned firms. We also discussed international trade issues and agreed that an EU-US trade agreement would provide a significant boost to the transatlantic economy.

We discussed Northern Ireland and Brexit. I explained Ireland's position and interests regarding the negotiations, as well as the likely adverse impact on the Irish economy on both sides of the Border which would stem from a disorderly withdrawal by the UK. I recalled the pivotal role that successive US Administrations have played in bringing peace to the North.

The Vice President set out the US Administration's established position, emphasising that it continues to back and defend the Good Friday Agreement, while at the same time backing the UK Government in its wish to leave the EU. He emphasised that the US Administration fully appreciates the importance of the Good Friday Agreement. He indicated the US will continue to urge the UK to ensure it is respected and taken into account in any agreement on the UK's withdrawal from the EU. This is a welcome and important statement from the US Administration.

We did not discuss immigration issues in great detail on this occasion. The Vice President is already keenly aware of Ireland's perspective on immigration issues, including our particular concerns about our undocumented citizens. I have had detailed discussions with the Vice President and with the US President, Donald Trump, on this matter previously. They are also both supportive of an E3 visa Bill which will expand eligibility to include Irish citizens. The

US Administration has been helpful in garnering support for the Bill in the US Congress.

This visit by the Vice President and his family represented another valuable opportunity to deepen one of Ireland's most important bilateral relationships. It is incumbent on us to ensure we never take the US-Ireland bilateral relationship for granted. We will continue to have a deep and comprehensive bilateral dialogue with the US at both a political and an official level.

I had the opportunity to again meet with Vice President Pence last week on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Given the number of questioners, I ask Members to stick to the time allowed.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The US Vice President's comments concerning Brexit were frankly inappropriate, given that US diplomats would have informed him in advance of the position of the Irish people on this matter. I note a worrying trend with the US Administration's anti-European Union stance. It is striking how the US Vice President's support for Brexit is like that of regimes trying to undermine the European Union. On this and many other areas, the current approach of the Washington Administration only serves to prove how much the world loses when the United States turns inwards.

One issue which has caused justified public concern about the visit is that the report that the Government spent an incredible €100,000 at the Trump hotel in Doonbeg during the visit. Will the Taoiseach clarify that? It sounds like an incredible sum of money. If it is the case, it would put us on a depressingly long list of countries which have spent large amounts in facilities owned by the US President. Will the Taoiseach clarify if this amount or anything close to it was spent on this visit? Does he think it is appropriate?

During the US Vice President's visit, it was announced by the Prime Minister of Israel that he intended to annex large portions of the West Bank if he succeeded forming a new right-wing government in Israel. It was clearly implied in reports that he expects to receive support for this from the Trump Administration.

**Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Howlin.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Did the Taoiseach convey to Mr. Pence Ireland's opposition to Israeli annexations and our belief that Washington needs to stop enabling Netanyahu taking more extreme positions?

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** In his reply today and in his commentary in the immediate aftermath of the Pence visit, the Taoiseach used what can only be described as diplomatic camouflage to respond to what were an unhelpful series of comments. The current hostility of the US Administration to the European project and to the European Union itself, along with its support for the hardest of hard-line approaches to the withdrawal agreement, are profoundly unhelpful. They are certainly not in keeping with the traditional view of a series of US Administrations of both Republican and Democratic Party hue. Maybe we need to burst through the diplomatic camouflage and make clear Ireland's interests in these matters.

We were told by the Garda Commissioner that the cost of the security element of the visit is of the order of €15 million to €18 million. We understand this will not be met by supplementary allocation, as is the norm, but is expected to be met from the current Garda budget. This will

put pressure on Garda overtime and activities for the rest of the year. Why is there a move away from the norm of a supplementary allocation for this security requirement of An Garda Síochána which could not be budgeted for when the Estimates were presented earlier in the year?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Last week, Tom Suozzi, a Democratic Representative, and Peter King, a Republican Representative, introduced a resolution to the US Congress which supports the avoidance of a hard border and protection for the Good Friday Agreement in the Brexit process. It insists that any new or amended trade agreements and other bilateral agreements between the governments of the United States and Britain include conditions requiring obligations under the Good Friday Agreement be met.

This is not the first time that US politicians have taken an active and responsible role in protecting the peace and economic stability of our island. Senior Democrats, including House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, and the head of the House Committee on Ways and Means, Richie Neal, have been unequivocal in their expectations of the British Prime Minister. Representative Neal has bluntly reminded Boris Johnson that Brexit is not about a return to empire and has accused his administration of collective amnesia regarding the success of the Good Friday Agreement. He also acknowledged that not many foreign policy initiatives have worked as well as the agreement.

We welcome the positive role US politicians are playing in seeking to protect the peace and people of this island. Boris Johnson should be taking heed of their words and actions. The ways and means committee is responsible for any future trade deal between Britain and the US. It is clear from this latest revelation that American legislators will not stand for any undermining of the Good Friday Agreement and the rights of citizens.

I am sure the House would like to formally recognise and commend US Congressmen for advancing this latest resolution supporting our country, the Good Friday Agreement and the people of island.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** My understanding is that US Vice President Pence thanked the Irish Government for the ongoing use of Shannon Airport by US army facilities in the movement of troops. The US Administration seems increasingly hostile to the European Union and, through Vice President Pence's comments during his visit, it is clearly siding with a hard Brexit UK Government position. During his address to the UN, the US President, Donald Trump, spoke about those who have a global outlook and those who are nationalist in their outlook, which his Administration is. At what point do we reconsider the use of Shannon Airport?

Will the Taoiseach arrange to send an update to me about what the checking arrangements for those military flights coming into Shannon Airport are in terms of what is carried or what they are used for?

When do we end up taking sides against the nationalist approach the US Government is currently taking?

**Deputy Joan Burton:** Recently, I was incredibly surprised to meet a group of five gardaí on the main road of the Phoenix Park. I had forgotten about the Pence visit. It is unfair to the Garda to effectively take a significant number of millions of euro out of its budget and not provide a Supplementary Estimate for the cost of visits, such as those of US Vice President Pence and of President Trump. I also saw in the newspapers recently that €107,000 was charged by the Trump hotel for Garda food, and presumably a cup of tea, in the context of the visit. When

communities are being stripped of the presence of community gardaí, how can the Taoiseach justify not reimbursing, through a Supplementary Estimate, the cost of the visits by the US Vice President and by the US President? These are important and are significant. Nobody disagrees with that. They should get an appropriate welcome. Nonetheless, the Taoiseach really got a sucker punch when, in the context of all the work done, in particular by Irish American politicians, to support the island of Ireland in relation to Brexit, the US Vice President put up his hand and said he is backing the British Prime Minister, Mr. Boris Johnson, the British and Brexit all the way.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** Maybe *sangfroid* is something the Taoiseach possesses but it was a humbling moment, both for him and for the people of Ireland-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** -----that they would walk away from supporting a fair resolution of the impasse with the UK on Brexit.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputies for their questions. As I stated in Wexford a few weeks ago, I felt the US Vice President's comments on Brexit, made while in Ireland, were unbalanced. He specifically called on the EU and Ireland to negotiate in good faith with the British Prime Minister, Mr. Johnson. That should have been qualified by recognising that we had negotiated in good faith with the former British Prime Minister, Mrs. May, for two years and came to an agreement. It should have been qualified by a call on the UK Government to also negotiate in good faith with Ireland and the EU. I had the opportunity to speak to him briefly in New York last week and I said that to him. I said that I was disappointed with what he said in Farmleigh and I felt it was unbalanced. He acknowledged what I had to say and assured me that he had taken back to the White House the concerns that I had expressed to him in our meeting in Farmleigh about stability, in particular, in Northern Ireland.

In terms of any spending at the Trump resort in Doolin in County Clare, that would have been incurred by the Garda and to the best of my knowledge would relate to accommodation and subsistence. I do not have any details of that but I am sure that the Garda Síochána would be able to provide that for Deputies on request.

It seems the total security cost for the two high-profile visits this year by President Trump and Vice President Pence would be somewhere in the region of €15 million to €18 million. What was not mentioned by Deputies was that the Garda overtime budget allocated for this year is, in fact, the second highest Garda overtime budget allocated ever.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** That was not known when it was allocated.

**The Taoiseach:** Within that, it is anticipated that there is one significant high-profile visit every year, whether it be President Trump this year, Pope Francis last year, etc.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** Can I ask what the overtime was meant for?

**The Taoiseach:** What is different is that there were two high-profile visits this year and that was not anticipated. That has given rise to a request for a Supplementary Estimate, which we are not ruling out at this stage. That is a matter for later in the year.

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As the Deputy will be aware, we are often criticised by others, such as the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, and often such criticism is echoed in this House, for Supplementary Estimates and for incurring costs during the year but the truth is sometimes that happens. Throughout the course of the year, not only in health but in other areas, costs that were not predicted arise and one must make a decision as to whether one will have a Supplementary Estimate or try to find the money by making savings elsewhere in the budget.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Government has had a Supplementary Estimate every year.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach is answering.

**The Taoiseach:** That is something we now need to work out between now and---

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Government has had a Supplementary Estimate every year.

**The Taoiseach:** A year has not passed in Irish financial history that the Government did not have Supplementary Estimates. If one did, I would like to know.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** This year the Government seems to be taking a different tack for some reason.

**The Taoiseach:** What we are doing this year is we are listening to the advice and criticism of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and trying to minimise the number of Supplementary Estimates so that if there are Supplementary Estimates this year across different Departments, they will be a fraction of what they were last year. That is us listening to and taking the advice of IFAC, which I think we should.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Or will the Government kick real problems into next year?

**The Taoiseach:** The issue of Israel and Palestine was not discussed in our meeting. However, the Government will oppose and object to any attempts by Israel to annex the Jordan Valley or any other part of the West Bank which we would consider to be both wrong and contrary to international law.

On the issue of Brexit and the Good Friday Agreement, picking up on Deputy McDonald's remarks, we have been very much buoyed by the very strong solidarity that we have received from quite a large number of members of the US Congress, Senators and Representatives alike. I refer, of course, to the Speaker, Representative Pelosi, but also people like, Representative Richard Neal, Representative Brendan Boyle and others. We are grateful for that support and hope it will continue. We are keen that it should be done on a bipartisan basis as well as much as is possible.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Can we move on to Question No. 8?

### **Cabinet Committee Meetings**

8. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he has attended Cabinet committee meetings recently. [37416/19]

9. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the number and type of Cabinet committee meetings held since June 2019. [37285/19]

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he has attended Cabinet committee meetings recently. [38537/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 to 10, inclusive, together.

In June, I chaired a meeting of Cabinet Committee G, justice and equality issues, and in July, I chaired a meeting of Cabinet Committee B, social policy and public services.

On 25 July, the Government decided to reorganise the Cabinet committee structures and established the following committees: economy; social policy and public services; infrastructure; Brexit, foreign and European affairs; environment; and security.

In September, I chaired meetings of the committees on economy; social policy and public services; infrastructure; Brexit, foreign and European affairs; and environment. The security meeting is scheduled.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I would say in passing that the Taoiseach's attitude to Cabinet sub-committees has been poor in terms of efficiency and the structures that he has brought in have been ineffective, particularly in housing and health. In particular, the issue of homelessness continues to get worse. The number, at more than 10,000 people are homeless with 70 new children becoming homeless last month alone, represents a policy that simply has not been working for the past three years. Given the large remit of these Cabinet sub-committees, it does not surprise me. There is no real back-up research under way in terms of initiatives that could change the sad story of homelessness in society which has got worse year after year under the Taoiseach's leadership.

I put it to the Taoiseach that it is likewise in the health area. The Taoiseach spoke about Supplementary Estimates. It has been my view, and it is the view of Mr. Tony O'Brien, the former CEO of the HSE, that the health Estimate has become a dark art and somewhat farcical, and no one seems to get any picture of the needs of the health service until after both the budget and the Estimates process. The Government keeps it closely guarded, gets technocratic and says that it is between the HSE and the Department of Health and then on to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. That is not acceptable. The idea that the Government will off-load the full amount of the overspend in health this year into next year for the first time means there will be significant problems for health in 2020. That is not sustainable. It is not acceptable because the system will not cope.

We already have serious situations in the health service. September was the worse month this year for overcrowding when over 10,000 patients went without a bed. Ten thousand people over the age of 70 are waiting over 24 hours in emergency departments.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** That is not to talk about the home help situation where there are significant delays in terms of home care packages and home helps, with consequential delayed discharges of patients from the acute hospitals where we cannot get locations, etc.-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** There is a real crisis. The Cabinet sub-committees seem ineffective in dealing with the issues of health and housing.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** In 2015, we in Sinn Féin published a fully costed ten-year plan to increase the capacity of the health service to achieve equality of access and to ensure it is funded on a fair and sustainable basis. That was followed by the all-party Oireachtas committee's plan, Sláintecare, which similarly provided for the development of a single-tier universal public health service over ten years. Despite the critical need for the solutions outlined by my party and indeed all parties and groupings in this House, including the Taoiseach's, the Government has failed to implement year one of Sláintecare. There is no sense of urgency from the Government on delivering Sláintecare and it does not appear that the Cabinet committee is pushing its delivery either. Perhaps the Taoiseach can outline for us what proposals or actions the committee has advanced to progress this vital reform in our health service. How quickly, for example, is the roll-out of GP care without charge going to happen? As the Taoiseach knows, because he had a copy of our budget 2020 document yesterday, we have proposed that everyone have access to GP care, not just those with an income so low that they qualify for a medical card or GP visit card, as is the case. The roll-out of free GP care should be advanced next year with two visits covered. That is the average number of visits that people who do not have a medical card make. There is no reason the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform could not follow our lead and introduce two free GP visits for everyone in next week's budget. He should also provide for medical cards for all cancer patients and make sure that older people are no longer forced to reapply for their cards so frequently. We need to see the Cabinet health committee taking a much more proactive role in transforming our health service, as was agreed by all of us through Sláintecare.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** As Hurricane Lorenzo careers towards this country, we have further evidence of the greater frequency of extreme weather events and of what the scientists tell us are the results of climate change. The Taoiseach says he wants to do something about that. However, this week - I want to ask if this was discussed at the environment committee - the Government is going to put forward a liquid natural gas terminal, which will cost hundreds of millions, to be built on the Shannon Estuary as a project of common interest on a list for the European Union to import fracked gas, potentially locking this country into the use of fossil fuels and dirty, dangerous fracked gas from the United States for decades to come. That is being done without the approval having been discussed at the joint committee or here in this House. It is absolutely outrageous. As we speak, there are people here from Pennsylvania and other parts of the United States who have come to give testament to the extraordinary pollution, damage and adverse health effects that have been inflicted on the people of Pennsylvania and elsewhere from this fracked gas. Mark Ruffalo, the actor, has been tweeting all week appealing to the Government not to approve this terminal because of the damage to human health and the environment fracking is doing in the United States. We banned fracking in this country because we did not want those effects in our countryside. Do we think simultaneously that it is okay to inflict them on the people of the United States for a so-called transitional fuel which in actuality is every bit as dangerous for global warming as carbon dioxide when we take into account methane leakage?

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Deputy Boyd Barrett is absolutely right. We need a full debate on expenditure of any moneys that would facilitate the long-term importing into the State of gas that is produced by fracking. There are real concerns about that.

I want to ask the Taoiseach about the whole Cabinet sub-committee structure. Certainly from my experience in government, it was one of the most useful things we could do. We cannot debate in detail with the senior civil servants present at a full Cabinet meeting but at the sub-

committees we can invigilate questions, drill down, demand answers, bring in all the relevant people and get papers presented in advance. I do not get a sense that is actually happening but I may be wrong. The Taoiseach might dispel that idea if I am wrong. I am very concerned about an area I was responsible for, namely, public sector reform. It was a mistake not to have a stand-alone Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform because there is just too much to do for a Minister who is jointly responsible for finance and public expenditure and reform. I always believed the reform side would fall by the wayside. Reform is not simply a subject to be focused on in times of crisis; it is ongoing. I repeatedly said that and I think the Taoiseach believes it too. There are big issues in terms of Garda reform that need clear public debate, encouragement and explanation so that people can be brought with us. The issue of morale in the Defence Forces has not been addressed. In terms of the health Estimate - I think I have a fairly good insight into the way health Estimates are constructed - there is a unique dichotomy between a Department of Health which actually organises the budget, makes the bid and argues the case and a HSE which expends and seems to be outside the control of anybody in terms of how it spends money that is argued for by our Department of Health.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** The little-known Department of Rural and Community Development is presided over by, it seems at times, a rather unhappy Minister, Deputy Ring. He is happy to be a Minister but deeply unhappy to have no capital funds. I want to give the Taoiseach an example from the constituency that he and I share of something that is being experienced all over the country. In Huntstown and Hartstown in Dublin 15, two community centres have recently been the subject - properly and at their request - of examinations in respect of issues like safety and fire safety. As a result, it has been suggested that significant sums are required for these vital local centres to continue to provide preschool, after-school, Irish dancing, sport and a range of other activities that are vital to every community large and small around the country. These communities do not have the capacity to raise more than €250,000 to refit these community centres to meet, correctly, fire standards. This kind of thing and other issues such as rural roads are small beer in terms of what Taoisigh are involved in. Unless people around the Cabinet table discuss and share the experiences of people who are suffering the loss of services or threatened with losing services, how does it come to the Taoiseach's attention that a simple little community centre in Huntstown and another one in Hartstown desperately need funding? Nobody in government will take responsibility because there is no venue where the matter can be reasonably discussed and proper provision made for what ordinary people and their children do.

**The Taoiseach:** To pick up on the Deputy's last question, the Department of Rural and Community Development actually has a very substantial capital budget. I think barely a week or a fortnight goes by that the Minister, Deputy Ring, does not announce capital grants all over the country.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** He has a slush fund.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** That is a slush fund.

**The Taoiseach:** There is, for example, a €1 billion rural development fund and he also has other capital schemes, like the town and village scheme, CLÁR and LEADER. He has made an allocation to Hartstown community centre to assist with the fire safety works. He would be happy to consider a request from Huntstown community centre for the same.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** I have a letter on my table this morning telling me this will be

brought to the Taoiseach's attention.

**The Taoiseach:** On the rural roads, the budget for roads has increased considerably in recent years. I do not have the exact figures in front of me but it is a very considerable increase in funding for local and regional roads. I think this falls under the remit of the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Ring, rather than that of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross. The Government has restored the local improvement scheme to provide funding for roads that have not been taken in charge but are in rural areas. That had been scrapped by the previous Government.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** The Taoiseach's drivers must be driving on pothole-free roads.

**The Taoiseach:** On the issue of Cabinet committees in general, I believe the Cabinet committee structure is working well. It has been amended slightly in recent months but, for the record, we had five Cabinet sub-committee meetings last month alone. These meetings are attended by officials, advisers and Ministers. They can work well provided there is a tight enough agenda and they are properly prepared for. The senior officials group which sits behind each of those Cabinet sub-committees does that. For example, the Cabinet sub-committee on the environment met this week, and that was a very good opportunity to review the progress being made on the implementation of the climate action plan and also some other issues around the just transition in particular.

I know from Deputy Martin's contributions in the Chamber that he is very keen on having extra reports and extra committees, and setting up new Government Departments and agencies. While that is not wrong in itself, I suspect it might actually be concealing a lack of real policies from the Fianna Fáil Party. For example, the Fianna Fáil Party policy on education is to set up a new Department of higher education. While that is fine, it cannot set up a new Department with a senior Minister unless it is willing to get rid of an existing Department. We have yet to hear from Fianna Fáil whether it intends to get rid of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs or the Department of Rural and Community Development. The same goes for the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It is possible to have two separate Departments with two senior Ministers but it is not a serious suggestion if one is not willing to say which of the existing Departments one would downgrade.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** We have already published our position on that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach. We move to Question No. 11.

**The Taoiseach:** I will look up which Department the Labour Party wishes to abolish or downgrade.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach should concentrate on his own policy.

**The Taoiseach:** Even more recently, the response by Fianna Fáil to the appalling attack on Kevin Lunney was to set up a new agency. I do not think that is much of a policy, quite frankly.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach should not be flippant about that. It is a serious issue.

**The Taoiseach:** It is a serious issue and it requires a better response. What it requires is the response we are getting from Government, which is more gardaí and an armed support unit in the Border region, and much more co-operation between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána.

The solution is not setting up another agency, it really is not.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach is wrong.

**The Taoiseach:** In regard to the Cabinet committee on social policy and public services, the last meeting of that committee was held only last month and it reviewed progress being made in regard to the implementation of Sláintecare. That goes to the Cabinet committee first and then the quarterly report goes to Cabinet. That indicates the good progress that is being made and it will be published quite soon.

In terms of Government policy on extending free GP care, as has been indicated already, we intend to extend it to all seven and eight year olds next year, around July, and to all nine and ten year olds the year after, adding two years in a stepwise fashion. I think it is important to do it gradually because we do not want to overwhelm GP surgeries with extra attendees. We know from the extension to the under sixes that there was a very considerable increase in attendances when it was made free, so we need to do it bit by bit.

Extending it to seven and eight year olds is, of course, in addition to groups that have already been brought in, such as the over 70s and the under sixes in coalition with Labour Party, and in coalition with the Independents, to carers, in regard to the higher income limits for the GP visit card and to all children in receipt of disability care allowance.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We must move on to the next question.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Can I have an answer on LNG?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I want to make the point to Members, with all due respect-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Mine was the only question not answered.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** With all due respect to everyone, this is meant to be questions to the Taoiseach. If Members avail of the opportunity to make long speeches, the time is not left for the Taoiseach to reply. I am entirely in your hands. Can we now-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Mine was the only question not answered.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** The Taoiseach asked questions of the Opposition.

**The Taoiseach:** They never get answered.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** As far as I can observe, we have a minute and a half of commentary rather than a minute and a half of questions. Can we go on to Question No. 11, please?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Can I have a brief answer to my question?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No, you cannot. We are moving to Question No. 11.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Mine was the only question not answered.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I will tell you what we will do. Will we forget about Question No. 11 and keep going on this?

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** No.

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**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I just want a brief answer.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are out of time. Does the Taoiseach want to say something briefly?

**The Taoiseach:** The question the Deputy asked was whether the LNG terminal was discussed at the Cabinet committee. It was not. My understanding is that the LNG terminal could be used to receive fracked gas, but not necessarily or exclusively. It could receive any liquefied natural gas so it could be used to receive gas transported by sea that is not fracked.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** That is not acceptable.

### **Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements**

11. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he has met or spoken to the leader of the UK Labour Party recently. [37417/19]

12. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he has met or spoken to the leader of the UK Labour Party. [38538/19]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 and 12 together.

As I reported to the House on 19 June, I met with the leader of the British Labour Party, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, MP, in Government Buildings on Thursday, 30 May 2019. Mr. Corbyn was accompanied by Tony Lloyd, MP, shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and several advisers. We discussed Northern Ireland, Brexit and the current political situation in Westminster. Discussions on Northern Ireland focused principally on the need to restore a power-sharing Executive and the importance of ongoing engagement with all political parties in the North. Mr. Corbyn and I also considered Brexit, with both of us sharing serious concerns about no deal and its inherent dangers, including the possibility that the UK may end up in a no-deal situation by default unless alternatives are pursued. We also discussed the importance of avoiding any return to a hard border on the island of Ireland. We agreed to stay in touch with regard to both Northern Ireland and Brexit.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Did the Taoiseach ask the leader of the Labour Party why he did not support the withdrawal agreement and why he did not facilitate the passage of that through Westminster? While I accept his good faith in terms of the Good Friday Agreement, it has to be said that his position on Brexit has not been constructive and has not really contributed to a resolution of the issue.

The reports last evening in regard to Boris Johnson's proposals confirm that, again, there is a lack of understanding of the situation in Northern Ireland. I think his attendance, with his party members shouting "No surrender", at a fringe event last evening was not good in terms of the future of this island and the relationships and sets of relationships in Northern Ireland or on the island itself.

It is being reported that an aide to Mr. Johnson came to Dublin in the last 48 hours to brief the Taoiseach and the Government. I would appreciate if the Taoiseach would confirm whether there was a verbal briefing from an aide to Prime Minister Johnson on the proposals that have been leaked and that he is about to announce today, on the basis that what has been leaked -

separate customs, VAT zones, a time limit on regulatory alignment and, essentially, the UK having a veto on everything - does not represent a serious proposal. The Taoiseach might indicate if it is true that, in the last 48 hours, he was briefed on this proposal.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** When we look at the mob scenes at the DUP meeting and Boris Johnson being part of that mob last night, and we consider that Johnson is clearly willing to risk everything in this country, economically and politically, I think people should be a little less keen to join in the sort of Johnson-type attacks on Jeremy Corbyn. There are a few things we know about Jeremy Corbyn. First, he is very committed to peace on this island and to Ireland in general, and he takes these issues very seriously. Unlike Johnson, he does not want a race to the bottom, not just for the North but he does not want a race to the bottom for Britain in the context of exit. He has said that he wants to remain in the customs union, so many of the problems Johnson's version of exit would cause would not even be at stake if we had a Corbyn government.

Is it not the fact, whatever the Taoiseach might think about him ideologically and all the rest of it, that in the context where a general election is now looming and, indeed, may be the only way we can actually stop a hard Brexit, Jeremy Corbyn is the best of all options available in terms of the outcome of the British general election?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask that we take a 30-second question from each of the remaining speakers, which will give us a chance to get a response from the Taoiseach. I call Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Certainly. I want to place on record, lest there be any misunderstanding, that Boris Johnson's behaviour is not driven by ignorance. It is not that, as Deputy Martin suggests, he does not understand. Boris Johnson understands full well the consequences of his recklessness. It is not ignorance of Ireland; it is more belligerence towards Ireland, North and South, that is at play, and I want to place that on the record as we await whatever proposals he may publish this afternoon.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I too met with Jeremy Corbyn when he was here in May and, of course, I met him last weekend at the British Labour Party conference. I also met Tom Watson, Keir Starmer, Emily Thornberry and Tony Lloyd, who was actually on his way to the United States to meet congressional friends of Ireland. The British Labour Party position is that whatever emerges in negotiations should be put to the people by way of a referendum, with the option to remain. That is a good position for Ireland because although this House have voted for the backstop, and the Labour Party strongly supports it, it will always be second best to the United Kingdom not exiting the European Union. We should not yield that position. If there is a general election in Britain, that possibility might re-emerge. I would be interested to hear the Taoiseach's view on this matter.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government recently gave an interview to *Village* magazine in which he expressed his admiration for Boris Johnson. The Taoiseach could say, and I would expect him to suggest, that for people on the left in Ireland, Jeremy Corbyn is a problem. For people on the right such as those in Fine Gael, a party which has shown admiration for him, Boris Johnson is a nightmare because he is recklessly destructive of the interests of the island of Ireland, North and South. The Taoiseach should therefore not go point-scoring on this. Jeremy Corbyn and, in particular, Keir Starmer have put forward very well-thought-out proposals as to how Brexit-----

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**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. Her time is up. May we hear the Taoiseach's response, please?

**Deputy Joan Burton:** -----can be handled in a way that would not be destructive of Ireland, North and South.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Micheál Martin asked me whether I asked Jeremy Corbyn why he did not support the withdrawal agreement. I did do so, and he essentially explained that the Labour Party wanted a different and closer relationship with the EU than that envisaged in the withdrawal agreement and the joint political declaration. Specifically, the Labour Party wants the UK to be part of some kind of customs union with the European Union and to have a say in that and wants a close relationship with the Single Market. Again, however, this is very much a cherry-picking kind of relationship. As Taoiseach and Head of Government, I will work with whoever is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Britain is on its third Prime Minister since the last general election here. We worked with David Cameron, we worked with Theresa May and we have worked with Boris Johnson. If Jeremy Corbyn or anyone else were to become Prime Minister, we would work with him or her too. That is our duty and obligation and it is exactly what we will do.

I can confirm that two of Prime Minister Johnson's aides visited Dublin and came yesterday morning to Government Buildings, where they gave my officials and advisers a verbal briefing on the UK Government's proposals. No documents were exchanged, however, and we will have to see what those proposals are later today. I intend to speak to Prime Minister Johnson this evening by telephone. I do not want to comment on any proposals being produced today until I have had a chance to see them and study them.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** The Taoiseach knows what they are, though.

**The Taoiseach:** What we are hearing is certainly not encouraging and, in my view, would not be the basis for an agreement, sadly. We want there to be a deal and an agreement and we will work until the last moment to secure an agreement, but not at any cost. We are ready for no-deal if that is what the British decide. However, I ask everybody in the British Government and the British political establishment to listen to all the people of Northern Ireland and not any one party. The people of Northern Ireland voted by a clear majority against Brexit, the majority of Members of the Stormont Assembly support the backstop, and the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland do not want customs posts between the North and the South.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy David Cullinane - to discuss the national review of cardiac services and whether an interim or final report will be published; (2) Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher - to discuss delays in provision of pre-approved home help services in County Donegal; (3) Deputy Joan Burton - to discuss the future of Huntstown community centre, Dublin 15, which is in

need of essential fire safety and structural remedial works; (4) Deputy James Lawless - to discuss traffic congestion in Maynooth, County Kildare; (5) Deputy Sean Sherlock - to discuss an upgrade to the N73 in County Cork; (6) Deputy Alan Kelly - to discuss the decision to move the new Tipperary-Clare regional Garda headquarters to Ennis; (7) Deputies Denis Naughten and Brian Stanley - to discuss the future of the 2,000 Bord na Móna jobs following the group of unions meeting with management last week; (8) Deputy Mary Butler - to discuss the waiting lists for home care supports in Waterford; (9) Deputy James Browne - the need for the Minister for Health to discuss the waiting lists for home care supports and home help in Wexford; (10) Deputy John Brassil - to discuss the waiting lists for home care supports in Kerry; (11) Deputies Frank O'Rourke and Fiona O'Loughlin - to discuss the HSE waiting times for children's assessment of need and delays in support services; (12) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the need to reconsider changes made to the planning application process which were designed to fast-track the process but which in practice have proved to be unworkable; (13) Deputies Pat Buckley, Louise O'Reilly and Mick Barry - to discuss the Government's plans to develop terminals for fracked gas importation in Ireland; to discuss the importation of fracked gas; plans to import fracked gas from the United States of America and the need to move to renewable energy; the background - this issue arises on foot of concerns that the Government will support a proposal at European level later this week to provide for the importation of fracked gas via interconnectors off the west coast; (14) Deputy Seamus Healy - the urgent need to approve the appointment of additional special needs assistants for Scoil Aonghusa, a special national school in Cashel, County Tipperary, as children with special needs are still awaiting places in the school for this year; (15) Deputy Stephen Donnelly - the need for the Minister for Education and Skills to discuss a permanent home for North Wicklow Educate Together secondary school; (16) Deputy Paul Murphy - the loss of jobs at Wrightbus in Ballymena; (17) Deputies Eamon Ryan, Bríd Smith, Richard Boyd Barrett, Joan Collins, Eamon Scanlon and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to ask the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if it is the Government's intention to continue to designate the Shannon liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal project as a European Union project of common interest, and why the Government is taking this approach, given the absence of a strategic environmental assessment for the project; the Government decision on the inclusion of the Shannon LNG on the EU's projects of common interest, PCIs; to discuss the issue of the PCI list for which the Government is seeking approval at the high-level regional meeting of the Directorate-General for Energy, DG Ener, at the European Commission this Friday, 4 October; the huge concern that this list includes the proposed Shannon LNG plant, a project which will involve the importation of fracked gas; to discuss proposed plans to build a fracked gas terminal in Shannon; to discuss the Government's plans to grant the Shannon LNG terminal special status, which would facilitate the importation of fracked gas from the US; the proposed Shannon LNG terminal and projects of common interest; (18) Deputy Eugene Murphy - to discuss the impact of rising floodwaters throughout the country, particularly along the River Shannon basin; and (19) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to urgently address funding for cancer supports in Cavan town.

The matters raised by Deputies David Cullinane; Frank O'Rourke and Fiona O'Loughlin; Denis Naughten and Brian Stanley; and Alan Kelly have been selected for discussion.

*Sitting suspended at 1.55 p.m. and resumed at 2.55 p.m.*

## Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

### Hospital Services

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The need for expanded cardiac services in the south east has been a big issue for people who live in the region. On foot of a number of meetings with Members of the Oireachtas of all parties from across the south east, the Minister for Health agreed to carry out a national review that would look at the provision of primary percutaneous coronary intervention, PPCI, or emergency cardiac care not just in the south east but across the State.

The south east is the only PPCI centre that has a single catheterisation laboratory. The clinicians and consultants say that it is neither viable nor the best method because it is a single point of failure. When the laboratory runs into difficulty at any time or needs to be repaired, the service is shut down. In fact, the catheterisation laboratory has closed on three occasions in the past month because of maintenance problems. Funding has been made available to upgrade the catheterisation laboratory at University Hospital Waterford, but hospital management cannot do it until it has a contingency in place because it would mean closing the laboratory for approximately three months. Having no emergency cases going to the hospital at any time of the day and especially during the busy weekdays for that length of time would be unacceptable.

I am anxious to know the current position regarding the national review. When it was established, the Minister stated that he hoped it would take 15 months but that it might take 18. It has certainly been in place for longer than that. I accept that it has a great deal of work to do. It involves public consultation and going to all the regions and meeting all the stakeholders, including consultants, in each of the PPCI centres. However, we must have an indication of when it will conclude its work, and some certainty must be given to patients across the region that there is a safe and accessible service. Clinicians must guide policy in this area.

To transition to a 24-7 PPCI service will require additional specialist staff and we all accept that. However, people in the south east deserve to have the same opportunities as anybody else and, from a logical perspective, it is not safe that patients who experience an emergency heart attack outside the hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. from Monday to Friday have to travel to either Cork or Dublin for care because it is not provided 24-7 in the south east. A second catheterisation laboratory is being progressed and is at design stage. That it has taken so long even to get it to that stage is just adding to the frustration of people in Waterford and the south east. They were expecting far more progress on this and to see its delivery more quickly. The commitment has been given, the funding is available and it is at design 2 stage. A private hospital is constructing another catheterisation laboratory so, hopefully, we will end up with three such laboratories operating in Waterford in the next 12 months or so. With that in place it makes perfect sense to expand the service to a 24-7 one. That cannot happen overnight, however. It is important that the review group concludes its work and makes its recommendation, which hopefully will be a positive one that Waterford should become a 24-7 PPCI centre. For that to happen it must recruit the staff and have the interventional cardiologists, support staff, radiographers and so forth. That is why I am anxious that the report would be concluded and make its recommendation. If it is positive, the groundwork can be done and we can deliver this service for the people of the region.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly):** I thank Deputy Cul-

linane for raising the important issue of the national review of specialist cardiac services and for giving me an opportunity to update the House on the latest position in this regard. The national review of specialist cardiac services commenced in January 2018 under the chairmanship of Professor Philip Nolan and a steering group was formed from nominations from interested stakeholders representing medical, professional-technical staff and nursing and patient representatives. The aim of this review is to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service. As set out in the National Development Plan 2018-2027, investment in cardiac catheterisation laboratories and other cardiac services infrastructure nationally will be informed by the outcome of the national review.

*3 o'clock*

Since the steering group first met at the end of January 2018, a large volume of its work has been completed. A total of 13 steering group meetings have taken place with a further two meetings scheduled to take place. To date the national review has completed a public consultation survey and collated and analysed information on activity levels in each of the hospital groups and all hospitals within the groups. A successful and well-attended stakeholder consultation was held in November 2018. The Health Research Board Collaboration in Ireland for Clinical Effectiveness Reviews, HRB-CICER, has completed an evidence review of specialist cardiac services looking at international standards for PCI centres, international models that might be applicable to the Irish healthcare system and the relationship between volume and patient outcomes for PCI. The evidence review has provided important guidance for the steering group thus far and arising from discussions at the steering group, the services have been asked to complete one additional evidence review question. Site visits to PCI centres around Ireland are under way and two international site visits are being planned. These site visits have included meetings with stakeholders in clinical, administrative, nursing and allied health professional roles. Further research is being undertaken by the health intelligence unit of the HSE with regards to geospatial analysis and mapping of networks of cardiac services from a national perspective.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The Minister's speech clearly sets out the work of the review group. The group has done a lot of research and has met with many stakeholders. Its members are visiting PCI centres in this State and internationally. I support the group's work because the decisions made will have to be underpinned by clinical evidence and good clinical governance. I asked for the Minister to give us an indication of when the group might conclude its work. There is urgency to this as it is a huge issue for people in the south east. There have been a large number of protests about the issue and, on the most recent occasion, 10,000 people took to the streets in the south east because they were fearful of not having the service.

I have never been alarmist about this issue and I am not going to raise people's fears. I did not promise to deliver it but to raise the issue as much as I can, in an honest and earnest way, to get the best outcome for the people who live in the south east. Those people will not, however, see anything in the Minister's reply on when the work will be complete. The work of the steering group is very extensive and welcome but it would be good if the Minister could follow up with a letter or some other indication as to when there might be an interim or, indeed, a final report. People are waiting for the recommendations and for a sense that this work will conclude. They are waiting to find out what services will be put in place in each region. I asked about a timeframe for delivery and it is no surprise to me that this was the one question that was not answered. That raises concerns for me so I respectfully ask the Minister of State to communicate

some estimation of a timeframe for me.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I acknowledge the bona fides of the Deputy opposite and thank him for his constructive approach and assistance with this matter. I appreciate that he does not wish to be antagonistic or political about it but that he wants to get it sorted, as do all Oireachtas Members from the south east. The chair has indicated that he hopes to have the review completed by the end of this year. The Minister will be made aware of any changes to this timeline. I acknowledge the detailed work that has been undertaken by the review group and I thank its members and stakeholders.

### **Special Educational Needs Service Provision**

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I want to talk about some shocking statistics. Some 78% of all children, particularly those with disabilities, wait more than the statutory maximum of three months for an assessment. There has been a 50% increase in children waiting more than 12 months for a speech and language initial assessment or therapy appointment. The figures for Kildare, which were released to me recently, show that waiting times for interventions for children were up to 60 weeks. If a child required a diagnostic assessment for ASD, he or she could be waiting for a year. This is absolutely outrageous. The Minister for Health and the Minister of State with responsibility for disability must recognise these shortfalls in order to overcome them.

We are not talking about luxuries but, literally, a passport for life for children because it would help them develop their own skills. A child who needs a special needs assessment when starting school has absolutely no opportunity of having one. It is absolutely shocking that there are delays of 12 months and more. A number of parents have been in contact with me and it is heart-rending to hear of parents trying to save money to pay for treatment to help their children. We all know that early intervention is key to ensuring children with disabilities and difficulties can live the best life possible. In order for schools, the community and the State to be able to support children, we need to have these assessments on a timely basis, to be followed by the necessary interventions.

**Deputy Frank O'Rourke:** I am disappointed that the Minister of State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Finian McGrath, is not in the House for this important matter but I acknowledge his engagement with me, on a one-to-one basis and alongside the different groups I have brought in from my constituency.

I represent Kildare North, which is in the CHO 7 area. There is an assessment of need and there are then follow-up services and care, based on what was identified in the assessment of need. The assessment takes approximately two years from the application date to the appointment date. What is of most concern is that when the assessment of need is carried out, the programme of supports and services identified as critical to help a child meet his or her full potential, whether it is occupational therapy, speech and language therapy or physiotherapy, particularly in the area of ASD, is not provided for two years or more. That is completely and utterly unacceptable and unfair because these children are the most vulnerable in society. They are being cared for and loved by their parents who have to fight every step of the way for everything. The whole process needs to be reviewed and an intervention, either with funding or better accountability, is required.

Parents have come to me having borrowed between €1,600 and €2,500 from loan sharks to cover the cost of an assessment of need for their children. This is unacceptable.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach as an deis labhairt ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo. I thank Deputies O'Loughlin and O'Rourke for raising this important issue today. The Disability Act provides for an assessment of need for people with disabilities. Any child born on or after 1 June 2002 who is suspected of having a disability is eligible to apply for an assessment of need that will detail his or her health needs arising from the disability. Since its commencement in 2007, there have been significant year on year increases in the number of children applying both for assessment of need and disability services generally. Unfortunately, these increases have led to the extended waiting periods currently being experienced. Both the Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities, on whose behalf I am speaking today, and the HSE recognise that assessments of need and early intervention services are essential in supporting children with disabilities and their families. I am aware that the HSE has undertaken a number of initiatives to address the excessive waiting times. To improve the assessment of need process and ensure that children receive an intervention as soon as is possible, the HSE has developed a new standard operating procedure for the assessment of need process. The purpose of this is to ensure children with disabilities and their families access appropriate assessment and intervention as quickly as possible. In addition, it will ensure that the approach to assessment of need is consistent across all HSE community healthcare organisation, CHO, areas.

It is intended that the procedure will be implemented nationally from the fourth quarter of 2019. Both the HSE and the National Disability Authority have identified that an increase in therapy resources is required to meet current unmet need and projected future needs in children's disability services nationally. Budget 2019 provided funding for an additional 100 therapy posts to help to reduce the long waiting times for assessment of need and enable children with disabilities to access timely assessment and intervention. Some of these posts are in place and many others are at varying stages of the recruitment process. The HSE expects to have all new posts in place by the end of this year. In addition, HSE disability services is currently engaged in a major reconfiguration of its existing therapy resources for children with disabilities into multidisciplinary geographically based teams, as part of its national programme on progressing disability services for children and young people under 18 years of age. The key objective of this programme is to bring about equity of access to disability services and consistency of service delivery, with a clear pathway for children with disabilities and their families to services, regardless of where they live, what school they go to or the nature of their difficulties. Evidence to date from areas where this has been rolled out shows that implementation of this programme will also have a positive impact on waiting lists both for assessments of need and therapy provision. While not addressing all needs, I am confident that these initiatives will have a significant positive impact in reducing waiting times for assessment of need over the course of the next year. I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputies.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** The Minister talks about equity of access, consistency of service delivery and a clear pathway for children with disabilities and their families to services regardless of where they live. That is simply not happening anywhere. It is certainly not happening in County Kildare. The reality is that children, especially those with disabilities, are missing out on vital treatments, services and supports which are crucial to improving their quality of life. As of April this year, there were 591 children awaiting speech and language services in County Kildare. Children wait for months for appointments, meaning that they are losing

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precious months or years in language development. Being able to communicate and develop one's communication skills to the best of one's ability is a basic human right. It is shocking to see the figures stacking up and increasing. Some 910 children are waiting for occupational therapy, of whom 80% have been waiting for more than 30 months. It is simply not good enough and it has to change.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I am sorry to cut the Deputy short on such an important issue but I have to keep to the times allotted.

**Deputy Frank O'Rourke:** I thank the Minister of State for his statement. It would be great if it was true. Unfortunately, none of what he is saying reflects reality. In recent years, we have not seen any improvement in waiting times in this area. That is fact. I am not here to play politics but to reflect the real issues we are encountering with the most vulnerable in society. We have to get real and deliver at the coalface for these children, who are the most vulnerable in society. They need this help to reach and maximise their true potential. We must reduce the burden for parents, guardians and families who have to fight 24-7 for their basic right. That is fundamentally wrong. We have to acknowledge that and get better at making things happen for them. It takes up to two years to have an assessment of need done and a further two years for services or therapies to be delivered, which is wrong. That is the reality, notwithstanding the contents of the Minister of State's statement. We have to look at what is happening on the ground, put measures in place to address the issue and direct the funding to where it needs to go to help the most vulnerable in society. This is critical because a group of people in society who are most in need is not reaching its true potential, which is unfair.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I thank the Deputies and assure them that their frustration and concern for children is shared on this side of the House. We understand the impact that this continues to have on children who want to access an education and be treated as equal citizens. As a parent, former teacher and former member of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills under the current Chair, Deputy O'Loughlin, I understand well the impact that these delays are having on people's right to equal access. That is why, in budget 2019, the Government provided funding for 100 new therapy posts across all specialties, not just speech and language therapy but also occupational therapy and physiotherapy. These posts are being assigned on the basis of need. The recruitment of 100 additional therapists is being completed as we speak. I regret it will take some time for that to have an impact on the system. The HSE has adopted a standard operating procedure which should result in a more efficient and equitable allocation of resources such that wherever a child lives, whether Kildare, Cork or Kerry, he or she will not experience a postcode lottery. I am confident that the new standard operating procedure will address that issue but time is needed to see the impact of these steps. We will do more in the coming year for children with special needs. I thank the Deputies for their continued support in this area. The continued focus on it is very welcome for the sake of all children with special needs.

## **Bord na Móna**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** The third issue in the name of Deputies Naughten and Stanley is very close to my own heart. I welcome the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Richard Bruton.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Local Deputies, including Deputies Eugene Murphy and Stanley, met representatives of the Bord na Móna group of unions yesterday. They informed us that the

company is currently borrowing money from day to day to pay its staff. The public service obligation finishes for Lough Ree power station on 9 December and for West Offaly power station on 31 December. The situation is completely unsustainable. We are facing an economic catastrophe across the middle of Ireland in just 68 days, with the loss of 2,000 direct jobs and another 2,000 jobs that are dependent on the wage packets of these employees. We need the Minister to take three urgent and immediate steps. The Government must make a clear and unambiguous statement reiterating its support for the co-firing of the two plants with both peat and biomass as per the unanimous request to the Minister made by all Deputies for the area in Tullamore last July. The Minister must immediately call in the chief executives of Bord na Móna and the ESB to get absolute clarity on the intention to submit a new planning application for West Offaly power station and to deal with the 3 million tonnes of milled peat that are currently on the bogs and have the potential to cause serious environmental harm if not removed from the bogs. The Government must immediately release funds from the climate action fund to start the rehabilitation of the decommissioned bogs across the midlands. I have written to the Minister directly on foot of correspondence I have received from the Taoiseach, who is supportive of the release of funding from the climate action fund to start the rehabilitation and allow for immediate employment of staff in Bord na Móna across the midlands.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I thank Deputy Naughten. He is always spot on with his speaking time, which I appreciate.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Acting Chairman. I acknowledge that he was also present at yesterday's meeting. The unions asked me to call that meeting last week. I believe it was very fruitful. We are facing a dire situation in respect of Bord na Móna. There are huge problems and it is facing a perfect storm. Workers are uncertain. They are not sure whether they will have jobs in two or three weeks' time, let alone in two or three months. Senior management has said that seismic changes will take place. This will have a very significant effect right across the midlands, particularly in Laois and Offaly. As the previous speaker said, the public service obligation, PSO, for the two peat-burning stations at Shannonbridge and Lough Ree will end in December. There are 3 million tonnes of fuel on the bog. I am advised that no price per tonne has been agreed with the ESB for that fuel. An Bord Pleanála has refused permission for co-fuelling at Shannonbridge. The licence for that ends in December 2020. No judicial review of that decision has been sought. We raised this issue with the Minister on 30 July, when we met him in Tullamore. The future of the briquette factory in Derrinlough is also threatened because it needs modernisation and also faces threats arising from carbon tax increases and smokeless fuel bans. With regard to the horticulture sector, Coolnamona and Kilberry are hanging by a thread. Peat is stockpiled on the bogs; I saw it again last Sunday. The decision by the British retailer, B&Q, to refuse compost partially composed of peat also poses a threat. Workers in Laois and south Kildare cannot be thrown on the scrapheap either.

What is needed is €30 million from the climate action fund to secure jobs and to commence the rehabilitation of bogs. This needs to be done and we need a proper plan for each bog. As part of a just transition, we need to finance the voluntary severance fund because we have workers who have no work. We need investment in alternative employment and training and upskilling in new industries. We also need to protect reasonable conditions of employment and to underpin the company's pension scheme. This is very important because there are almost more pensioners than workers with Bord na Móna because of the historical context in which Bord na Móna employed multiples - many thousands more - of what it does now. Time is of the essence in this regard.

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I thank both Deputies for raising this issue. I am aware of their intensity of feeling in this regard. I will just say a few things. Just transition is at the very heart of the climate action plan and Government has recognised that those who are most exposed to the impact of the climate transition that is under way have to be protected and that we have to support people. The co-firing plan was Government policy and was supported. It would have allowed for a phased withdrawal from peat. The result of the decision of An Bord Pleanála is being intensely reviewed. I point out to Deputy Stanley that judicial review is a very particular type of challenge to a decision. It relates to a failure in procedures. Clearly, that is different from what is now being assessed, which is whether a planning application can be made which would meet the requirements of the board. That is what the ESB is currently evaluating.

As the Deputy knows, the first thing I did when this information became public was not only to meet with the public representatives, including the Deputies, involved, but to meet with the worker directors of the company, the Oireachtas Members representing the midlands, the midland regional transition team, the regional enterprise team, and the regional skills forum. I recently also met with representatives of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. On foot of our July Cabinet meeting, we have set up an interdepartmental group, led by the Department of the Taoiseach, to work on the just transition plan, that is to say, to prepare for different contingencies that may arise in this context. That work is ongoing. There will be several strands to the Government's approach. There will be elements of diversification within Bord na Móna. I acknowledge Deputy Naughten's submission which dealt with particular elements of that diversification. There will also be a focus on an accelerated programme of bog restoration. Many recognise that this is an area on which we can work, perhaps not only in respect of Bord na Móna bogs, but bogs further afield. There is also a need for other regional initiatives in respect of urban and rural enterprise developments that can support the transition not only for the individual workers concerned, but for the wider communities.

I assure the Deputies that Government is giving this issue very intensive attention. In addition, we have secured agreement that the midlands will be part of the platform for coal and other carbon-intensive regions. A team from the EU will be visiting to provide advice on the supports that may come from that direction. At this point, the EU has not committed to any funding in this regard but the new Commission is certainly looking at it more favourably. I recognise that we have to show our capacity to breathe reality into the words "just transition" for those working in the midlands and for the many people who are dependent on those workers as part of the operation of the midlands economy. We are working on the issue. The Deputies' raising of it is timely. Deputy Corcoran Kennedy also raised it last week. I understand that there is intense concern about these developments in the constituencies involved. I assure the Deputies that it is getting very considerable attention from Government as we prepare for the contingencies that might arise.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** By Christmas Day, 2,000 people across the midlands could be without a job, with a further 2,000 people looking to the New Year in despair in light of the likely loss of their own jobs. Will the Minister give a commitment here, on the floor of the House, that he will bring in the chief executives of the ESB and of Bord na Móna and provide the public with absolute clarity with regard to a new planning application and what is to be done with the 3 million tonnes of peat currently on the bog? Will he clarify to the House that we have already missed the boat with regard to a judicial review, because the date has now expired, and that we are now talking about a new application? We are all committed to a just transition, but

it must be backed up by cash. Cash must be put into next week's budget to implement that just transition. It must be provided next week, not next year or the year after. We need to put a just transition plan in place. It should be something along the lines of the plan in place in Spain, where the coal industry is being decommissioned. I will present the Minister's office with a copy of that plan. It could be used as a template for doing what urgently needs to be done across the midland counties.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I concur with what the previous speaker has said; time is of the essence. What we heard about the situation yesterday demonstrates that time is not on our side, as those of us who have been following the issue and making representations on it know. We are literally trying to catch up by 25 or 30 years. As has already been said, this issue needs to be dealt with in the budget next week. With regard to the climate action fund, funding needs to be released. Workers need some certainty. They do not know whether they will have a job in two, three, or four weeks' time. That is the reality. I have met workers in the last week who do not know. We declared a climate emergency; we accepted that we have one. Bord na Móna is now part of that emergency. The programme for Government says that "The Departments with responsibility for Agriculture and Energy policy will explore, with Bord na Móna, the potential of energy crops, which can be grown in the vicinity of Bord na Móna plants". I have been hammering this issue for years. Has that happened? Is that under way? The Minister needs to sit down with the CEOs of Bord na Móna and the ESB, because the two companies are linked on this issue, in order to set out a way forward, of which the Minister can then inform us. He needs to make a statement regarding co-firing as it is Government policy to co-fire peat and biomass. The Government needs to give a clear policy direction with regard to biomass, biogas, wind, solar, and forestry. These are the new industries that will be needed to replace peat.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I assure the Deputies that I have already met with both CEOs. The ESB in particular is intensively assessing its options in light of An Bord Pleanála's decision. The decision An Bord Pleanála has made has been made in respect of west Offaly. The application from Lough Rea is with Longford County Council. Edenderry has permission for co-firing up to 2023. That was not clear from the contributions.

I am very much aware that this is a serious threat and that we have to take it seriously. We must seek the best outcome for the workers. I have met them and am very much aware of their concerns and expectations of work based on the co-firing approach. If that approach cannot be adopted, we need to consider the contingencies associated with replacing it for the workers involved. We are examining all the options to ensure we will be in a position to make decisions in the interest of the workers and the region and in the context of the climate action plan on which we are working. I assure the Deputies that this is a top priority in my Department and that it is receiving the attention it deserves.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** The next issue is in the name of Deputy Kelly, who wishes to discuss the decision to move the new Tipperary-Clare regional Garda headquarters to Ennis. Will the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, be taking it?

**Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Canney):** If Deputy Kelly wants to wait for the Minister, that is fine with me.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The practice in this House is that a relevant Minister answers the questions. I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, but he is not a Minister

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in the Department of Justice and Equality. If he were a Minister of State in that Department, it would be fine. As a former Minister, I know that all Ministers' first duty is to this House. I believe there are four Ministers in the Department of Justice and Equality. There are certainly three. Where are they?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I am deputising as Chair and I have no responsibility for the Minister or Ministers of State.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am not saying that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I advise the Deputy to take it up with the Ceann Comhairle. This has arisen before. All I can do is advise-----

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, who is a fine Minister of State in his own area, but to be fair he will only be reading a script. This is about a very serious issue, namely, the loss of the regional headquarters of An Garda Síochána in Tipperary. They are being moved to Ennis. To be fair to the Minister of State, although he knows my county well, he would not have knowledge about this topic. I have many serious questions. I find it extraordinary that the Department of Justice and Equality cannot honour this House by having a Minister available to deal with such a serious issue.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I understand the Deputy's frustration. It is not the first time this has happened. All I can say is that I will talk to the Ceann Comhairle. I now ask the Deputy to proceed.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** No. I will not be proceeding. This is disrespectful to the House.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I am here chairing. If the Deputy does not wish to raise his matter, I will suspend the House for the next few minutes.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** That is fine. I am entitled to make my point. I mean no disrespect-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I allowed the Deputy to make his point.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I mean no disrespect to the Acting Chairman. There is no point in my coming in here to raise a topical issue if there are Ministers available and if not one has the courtesy to answer a serious question pertaining to his or her Department. It is just not acceptable. The custom and practice here is that if a Minister from the Department is not available, the Department contacts the person asking the question, in this case me, to seek agreement on another arrangement. That never happened. This is insulting to this House and to me as the questioner.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I do not dispute the case the Deputy is making and I understand his frustration but if he wishes to withdraw his issue, he may do so now.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** What is the point in asking my question? I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State who is present, Deputy Canney. What is the point?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** I presume that if the relevant Minister is not available, a Minister of State takes the question. We do not like it but that is the procedure.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The procedure is to make a Minister of State from the relevant Department available. In this scenario, none of the three Ministers of State seems to be available. In this case, the procedure is that the questioner should be asked whether it is acceptable for

another Minister or Minister of State to take the question. I was not asked. I expected to have a Minister from the Department of Justice and Equality here today. It is the norm.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** The Deputy has made his point. If he wishes, he can defer the matter. I cannot do anything else for him.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I understand that. I have no issue with the Acting Chairman. What I am saying is accurate. This is insulting and wrong. That the Department of Justice and Equality could not bother its backside to make one Minister or Minister of State available, or extend to me the courtesy of telling me they were not available, reflects on how seriously it takes the issue of policing in County Tipperary. I would like to know where the Ministers' diaries are. I would like to know where they all were today. They had not the courtesy to come into this House and talk to the people of County Tipperary, through their public representative, about why these policing changes are being made in the county. I will not be proceeding with my topical issue. I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State who is present. It has nothing to do with him at all, to be fair to him. Through the Office of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, who has just entered the Chamber, I wish to find out why a Minister or Minister of State was not made available or why his or her absence was not communicated to me beforehand.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** As I said, I totally understand the Deputy's frustration and can see the point he is making. I will talk to the Ceann Comhairle.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** It is more than a point. It is the custom and practice.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy):** We are not going to start arguing over words. All I can say to the Deputy is that if he wishes to defer his matter, he should do so and take the matter up with the Ceann Comhairle. I will also speak to the Ceann Comhairle about it.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I thank the Acting Chairman.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** To clarify what was said by the Acting Chairman, Deputy Eugene Murphy, if a Minister or Minister of State from the relevant Department is not available or will not be available, it is normal to tell the Office of the Ceann Comhairle.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Did it happen in this instance?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I cannot say categorically but I doubt if we were told. If we had been, the officials would have dealt with it. It is the Deputy's right to request a deferral. I will ask the Ceann Comhairle to consider the matter for tomorrow or the next day the Deputy is available.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

## **Firearms and Offensive Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2019: Second Stage [Private Members]**

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I welcome the opportunity to open the Second Stage debate on the Firearms and Offensive

Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2019. The purpose of this legislation is to amend the legislation of 1990, the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990 and, in particular, to amend section 9 of that Act, which deals with the carrying of knives. In particular, the purpose of the legislation is to increase the maximum sentence that can be imposed on a person who is convicted on indictment of having in his or her possession a knife for the purpose of inflicting harm on another person. At present, the maximum penalty under the legislation is five years' imprisonment. The purpose of the Fianna Fáil Bill is to increase that penalty to a maximum sentence of ten years.

The background to this amending legislation derives from the increase in the number of assaults in cities, towns and - I regret to say - smaller towns. According to statistics released recently by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, the number of assaults being perpetrated increased by 6.7% in the year up to the second quarter of 2019. Unfortunately, one of the deficiencies of the figures placed into the public domain by the CSO is that they do not permit us to identify the number or percentage of assaults that are perpetrated through the use of knives. On the basis of other information that is available, however, the Fianna Fáil Deputies who are going to speak on this legislation are concerned that the prevalence of knife crime in Ireland is increasing.

The first item of evidence on which our concerns are based is the response to a parliamentary question I tabled to the Minister, Deputy Flanagan. This response has enabled us to identify how many knives were seized by An Garda Síochána in 2016, 2017 and 2018. It does not indicate how many crimes were committed using knives, but it indicates the extent to which knives are being carried by individuals in public for no lawful purpose. I was told in response to my parliamentary question that 1,200 knives were seized by An Garda Síochána in 2016. I understand that 2,000 knives were seized by An Garda Síochána in 2018. This increase of approximately 66% shows that the number of people carrying knives unlawfully appears to be increasing.

We also have evidence from some tragic events that took place this summer. This evidence leads us to believe there is a growing problem with knives. In May, June and July of this year, four people were killed in our capital city as a result of being stabbed with knives. In May, a young man - we could describe him as a boy - of 18 years of age was fatally stabbed in the Finsbury Park area of Dundrum in Dublin. Tragically, he lost his life. In June, a homeless man was stabbed in the vicinity of the GPO. He also lost his life. In the same month, a Latvian woman who was staying in a hostel in west Dublin was stabbed and fatally injured. She lost her life as a result of the use of a knife. In July, a man was stabbed and fatally injured in the North Strand area of the north inner city. He lost his life as a result of an attack with a knife. I have given some examples of people who have lost their lives as a result of knife crime. We are aware of a number of other attacks this summer. In July, an 18 year old man was hospitalised after being stabbed in Crumlin. In the same month, a 30 year old man was attacked in Temple Bar. He was stabbed when he was walking home. This is not just a Dublin problem. I regret to say that a member of An Garda Síochána was slashed with a sharp implement, causing him significant and serious injuries, in the course of his duty in Dundalk last week.

I regret to say that this grisly catalogue indicates that knives are being used more frequently and are having a negative, and sometimes fatal, impact on the individuals who use them. I suspect that many young men carry knives at night in the belief that it is necessary and helpful to do so in order to be able to defend themselves. We need to inform them that they are wrong in this regard. We need to help people to recognise that if they go out with knives - even if they do not intend to use them - and if they get into an argument, the strong likelihood is that somebody will be fatally or seriously injured as a result of a knife being present during the dispute.

I suspect it is also the case that many people who go out with knives do not intend to use them, but as a result of a combination of alcohol, drugs, aggression or loss of temper, they find themselves doing so. This can have appalling consequences for their lives as well as the lives of the victims. People who do not intend to use knives when they go out but who end up doing so can find themselves subject to manslaughter or murder charges in respect of things they probably did not intend to do.

Obviously, the State can go down many avenues as it seeks to deter people from carrying and using knives. The first legislative avenue that is available to us is the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990, sections 9(4) and 9(5) of which provide that it is a criminal offence to carry a knife in a public area for the purpose of incapacitating or injuring another person. Section 9(7) sets out the penalties that should be imposed. As already stated, this Bill seeks to amend that section by providing that the sentence which can be imposed on someone who is convicted on indictment of being caught with a knife in a public place for the purpose of inflicting injury or harm on another person should be increased from five years to nine years.

Regrettably, in the context of the neighbouring jurisdiction, we have seen what happens when it becomes perceived as acceptable for young men to carry knives with them when they go out at night. There has been a tragic litany of fatalities there. Large numbers of people have been victims of knife crime in the United Kingdom, particularly in London. We have seen that it has become a trend in London for young people in gangs to carry knives and use them to inflict damage on one another. We have to ensure we do not allow that type of society to develop in Ireland. We must not allow young men to think it is acceptable for them to carry knives in public. In other jurisdictions, the carrying of knives is perceived as a form of prowess on the part of individual gang members. The Oireachtas needs to send a loud and clear message that this is not acceptable.

Our efforts to deal with knife crime, or, indeed, any crime, cannot be confined to the use of the legislative tools available to us in this House. Legislation will not solve society's problems in their totality. We need to recognise that other mechanisms and other avenues have to be used as well. We must recognise that we have a strong job of work to do in informing and educating young people about the dangers of knives. It appears that many people get involved in committing assaults or in using a knife to attack someone else as a result of taking drugs, or drugs combined with alcohol, which can have a very toxic impact on individuals and particularly on their aggression levels. We need to start informing and warning young people about the dangers of carrying knives and about the impact that taking drugs and alcohol together can have on their aggression levels. It can turn someone into a person that he or she is not, for a particular evening, with horrendous consequences for him or her and for other people.

I commend the Bill to the House. I am sharing time with my colleagues, Deputies O'Loughlin, Lawless and Butler, who have many anecdotes to tell about how their constituencies have been affected by these crimes.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I commend my colleague, Deputy O'Callaghan, on bringing this important measure before the House. It is part of my party's plans for reforming the criminal justice system. This is one of many important initiatives to have been brought forward by Deputy O'Callaghan during the lifetime of the current Dáil. As he outlined, the introduction of this Bill, which we hope will be enacted and carried forward into the criminal justice system, sends out an important signal that knife crime is unacceptable. We cannot allow a culture to emerge where it is acceptable or becomes the norm to carry an offensive weapon such as a knife

or similar implement because the more knives that are in circulation the more likely it is that they will be used in a fatal crime. It is a vicious circle because the more accidents, injuries and attacks that occur, the more likely it is that people in those circles will begin to carry knives for the purposes of defence. That exacerbates and perpetuates the cycle.

A report in *The Irish Times* in April this year claimed that the number of fatal stabbings in the jurisdiction of England and Wales was at an all-time high. Only a third of the way into the year, ten teenagers had already been fatally stabbed in the UK. We can see what is happening across the water and in other jurisdictions, and we do not want the same to happen here. The Bill is a very important signal to send out that knife crime, in particular, is more heinous and something which should be punished appropriately. By elevating the offence and sanction, we are making that clear. We are also making it clear to the Judiciary what we expect in terms of enforcement of these measures.

As I said, this is one of many measures Deputy O'Callaghan has proposed on behalf of my party. Other initiatives in the system are equally important in tackling antisocial behaviours and corrosion and corruption in the community sense, right down to difficult repeat behaviours such as noisy neighbours, harassment, littering and public drinking which corrode a community and society and can be very difficult for a local authority or Garda force to police efficiently and correctly.

There is a financial cost to repeat prosecution. Part of our proposals in that regard will include such things as community protection orders and dispersal orders. Community protection orders could be targeted at repeat offenders at lower levels in order to try to manage very difficult and problematic crimes and antisocial behaviour as it creeps out into communities, estates and public places. These measures will try to put a cap on such behaviour so that the quality of life for all is improved. Many of these measures serve as a signal to others that this behaviour will not be tolerated. Deterrents must be put in place to ensure such behaviour will be punished. I commend the Bill to the House.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I compliment my colleague, Deputy O'Callaghan, and thank him for his ongoing work on the important Bills he has brought forward during the term of the Dáil to make our country a safer place to live in.

Fianna Fáil is seeking cross-party support for this important Bill, which proposes to increase the maximum sentence which can be imposed for carrying a knife intended to injure a person from five to ten years thereby deterring people from carrying knives. Stronger deterrents are necessary in order to cut down on the growing knife culture in Ireland, in particular among younger people. Unfortunately, it is the case that many people, in particular young men, think it is appropriate and sometimes necessary to carry knives. We need to send out a message that it is wholly unacceptable for anyone to carry knives for the purpose of inflicting harm on others, even if they think knives are necessary to defend themselves.

There is a lack of available data regarding the prevalence of knife crime in this country. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, does not release statistics relating to the incidence of crimes involving the presence of knives. It has a concern that information provided through the PULSE database would yield inaccurate or misleading results. Despite the lack of data, there is growing anecdotal evidence that a subculture has developed where carrying knives is acceptable.

In recent times, there have been a number of horrendous crimes involving knives where

lives have been lost and life-altering injuries have occurred. Older people in rural areas feel especially vulnerable, in particular with the winter months and dark evenings approaching. The home of an 86-year old neighbour of mine was broken into recently. Thankfully, he was not at home. His savings were taken, his home was ransacked, bleach was poured everywhere and his home, his castle where he had lived all his life, was destroyed. There was no knife involved or face-to-face interaction, but the effects have been devastating. I can only imagine the after-effects for a person, young or old, who has been threatened by a knife. Having seen first hand how this man's life has been cruelly destroyed in his latter years because of this horrific crime, I shudder to think what would have happened if he had been faced with an attacker with a knife. This is a culture we need to stamp out, and the Bill will send out a very clear message and act as a deterrent.

Knife crime cannot be dealt with in isolation. The prevalence of drug use also has a major part to play. Tackling the country's crippling drug problem requires major reforms to our approach. Every day we hear stories of individuals, families and communities around the country that have been devastated by drugs. Drug-related harm consistently clusters in communities marked by poverty and social inequality. These communities cannot survive if this continues. Nonetheless, we should not think that drug problems are simply confined to these communities. When a person is desperate for drugs and needs money to fuel an addiction, unfortunately knife crime can be used to attack or steal from a person.

I welcome that, in recognition of the epidemic in knife crime, the Garda recently announced plans to roll out a national anti-knife awareness campaign. This is welcome, but we, as legislators, must play our role in introducing legislation which will help to tackle the increased level of knife crime.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I commend my colleague, Deputy O'Callaghan, on bringing the Bill before the Dáil. We, in Fianna Fáil, stand firmly behind him and hope the Bill will progress and make life a bit safer for people around the country. This is an important Bill, in that it will increase the maximum sentence which can be imposed for the possession of a knife with intent to harm which sends out a very strong signal that it is completely wrong to carry knives and we will not tolerate knife crime in this country.

While we acknowledge that there is a lack of available data on the prevalence of knife crime in the country, we have to ask, through the joint policing committees of which we are all members, that this area is examined and details are given. In my county, Kildare, an 18-year old was stabbed in April and a woman was attacked in February. Not far from where I live in Newbridge, a 20-year old woman, Kim Amy Smith, was threatened in an incident where a knife was held up to her face and her handbag cut with a knife. Luckily, she did not fight back because she was afraid of her face being marked. No county is immune to this type of crime and the Bill should help us to tackle it.

The CSO does not release statistics relating to the incidence of crimes involving the presence of knives because it is concerned that the PULSE database would yield inaccurate or misleading results. I cannot understand why that is the case. In the past few months four people were murdered through knife crime. A number of people were hospitalised following very serious attacks, which is shocking.

I commend the Garda. Having recognised the knife crime epidemic, it has announced plans to roll out a national anti-knives awareness campaign. That is welcome, but it is not enough.

We in the House, as legislators, have to play our role in terms of introducing legislation which will help to tackle the increased level of knife crime. The provisions in the Bill will help to do that.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):** I would like to join with other Deputies in thanking Deputy O’Callaghan for bringing this important Bill before the House and facilitating this very important debate. Everyone in the House was shocked by the tragic knife-related events which occurred earlier this year and to which colleagues opposite have referred. They highlight only too clearly the trauma and damage which can occur when knives are used during serious assaults.

All Members are conscious of the very serious impact which violent crime, particularly attacks of a random nature, has on victims and families. The Fianna Fáil Deputies who have spoken described that very well.

At an operational level, the Garda Síochána proactively targets public disorder and anti-social behaviour, including knife-related crime, through the strategic deployment of Garda resources. Unfortunately, many incidents involving knives occur with a degree of spontaneity which increases the challenges for preventative policing and enforcement.

The spirit and intention of the Bill is clear, namely, to ensure that the penalties for knife-related crime serve as a deterrent to such criminal activity. As the law stands, the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990 provides a comprehensive and robust legal framework with respect to knife crime, including heavy penalties for breaches of the law concerned. The maximum penalty for an offence under subsection 9(1), namely, possession of a knife in a public place without lawful authority or reasonable excuse, was increased from one year to five years by the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. That Act also provided the Garda Síochána with an extended power of search without warrant in respect of knives and offensive weapons.

The Commissioner has advised that the Garda Síochána tackles knife crime through a tiered approach involving a rigorous enforcement policy, education and awareness-raising programmes. In addition, detective units and divisional crime task forces may be utilised to provide a high-visibility presence in areas such as late-night bars, clubs, etc., particularly when people are exiting premises, to deter and detect anti-social behaviour and possible altercations.

The number of knives seized has risen from approximately 1,200 in 2016 to 1,600 in 2017 and almost 2,000 last year, but this is an indication of increased Garda activity in tackling knife crime, as well as improvements in the recording of knife seizures. It is notable that recent media reports pointed out that the number of serious knife assault injuries recorded in Irish hospitals last year was the lowest since at least 2005. When combined with the Garda Síochána seizure data, this suggests that knife crime remains relatively low and that the Garda continues to be extremely proactive in tackling these issues. That is further evidenced by the fact that Irish Prison Service figures indicate that 34 prisoners are in custody serving a sentence on charges of possession of a knife or flick knife. Their sentences are at the lower end of the existing sentencing range, with the majority serving sentences of less than one year.

The Garda recently launched its assaults in public reduction strategy, which includes a knife crime element. It was approved by the Garda executive in August 2019 and commenced on a national basis on 2 September under the operational name Operation Soteria. The strategy

has been communicated throughout the Garda Síochána for implementation between 2019 and 2021 and will be under constant progress review by local and national management. Its overall objective is to reduce the incidence of assaults in public places, including assaults involving the use of a knife or other weapon. The Garda Síochána is dealing very effectively with the issue of knife crime. However, the Government must never be complacent and the response to all aspects of criminal activity must be kept under continual review.

Deputy O’Callaghan outlined his reasons for introducing the Bill. It was introduced following several knife-related incidents earlier this year and because of the increase in the number of knives seized by the Garda Síochána. As I stated, I am of the view that the rise in knife seizures is an indication of proactive policing, with increased Garda activity in tackling knife crime arising from the additional resources which the Government has provided to the Garda Commissioner in recent years. As Deputy O’Callaghan outlined, the purpose of the Bill is to amend section 9(7), dealing with the possession of knives and other articles, of the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990 by increasing from five years to ten years the maximum sentence which can be imposed on a person convicted of possession of a knife under section 9(1), (4) or (5). Section 9(1) creates an offence in circumstances where “a person has with him in any public place any knife or any other article which has a blade or which is sharply pointed”. Section 9(4) states: “Where a person, without lawful authority or reasonable excuse (the onus of proving which shall lie on him), has with him in any public place any flick-knife, or any other article whatsoever made or adapted for use for causing injury to or incapacitating a person, he shall be guilty of an offence.” Section 9(5) provides that: “Where a person has with him in any public place any article intended by him unlawfully to cause injury to, incapacitate or intimidate any person either in a particular eventuality or otherwise, he shall be guilty of an offence.”

In principle, I am open to considering the case for increased penalties for possession of knives and other similar articles. However, the Bill as drafted requires detailed consideration to ensure that the consequences of such legislative change are identified and taken into account. The five-year sentence currently provided for in the 1990 Act is in line with other sentences in the 1990 Act and comparable offences such as, for example, assault causing harm under section 3 of the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997, which carries a penalty of five years. I note that the Deputy does not propose an increase in sentences for what appear to be more serious offences under the 1990 Act. This would mean that, on enactment of the legislation, the offences under sections 10 and 11 of the 1990 Act, namely, trespassing with a knife or other weapon made for causing injury or incapacitating a person or intended for such use, and production of an article capable of inflicting serious injury while committing or about to commit an offence or in the course of a dispute or fight, would still carry penalties of five years, resulting in an imbalance in the penalties for offences in the 1990 Act. I am also concerned that an increase in penalties for possession of a knife would be disproportionate to penalties for more serious offences such as, for example, possession of a firearm, for which a maximum sentence of up to ten years is provided.

As I stated, the Government is, in principle, open to considering the case for increased penalties for possession of knives. I acknowledge the number of fatalities arising from knife-related incidents earlier this year and sympathise with the families concerned, as do other Deputies. I am aware that several Deputies, including some speakers thus far on the Bill, have voiced concerns about such incidents. In that light, I will not oppose the Bill subject to engagement with Deputy O’Callaghan to highlight a number of difficulties with the range of penalties proposed, in addition to its being scrutinised by the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality with

particular reference to the likely unintended consequences of the proposed amendments *vis-à-vis* sanctions for possession of other weapons. As the Bill provides for an increase in criminal penalties, the issue of a money message will need to be addressed in due course. In principle, it is very important to have this debate at this time and for the committee to scrutinise the Bill to identify any unintended consequences from which we can learn. The Government is happy to engage further with Deputy O’Callaghan as the Bill progresses through the Houses.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I commend Deputy O’Callaghan on bringing forward the Bill. The issue of knife crime, as well as violent crime in general, has affected communities across the country. The use of knives has had a dramatic and terrible effect on many victims and, often, the perpetrators also. As was pointed out, the perpetrator may have been intoxicated or under the influence of drugs and ended up in a terrible situation, filled with regret and remorse.

The essence of the Bill is its proposal to increase the sentence and deterrent. It is about getting people to think before they act and to recognise that they must be very careful when going to enjoy a night out. People need to think long and hard about choosing to bring an offensive weapon with them on such occasions, whether they think it is needed for defence or otherwise. In my area, there is very vibrant night life in the town of Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim. A significant number of people visit the town, with many of them taking part in hen or stag parties. The town has enjoyed huge success in terms of how business owners and the Garda have worked together to provide a safe place for people to congregate and enjoy themselves on the streets or in premises. Many security staff are employed by the businesses. It is very well run and works very well. That said, there are occasional incidents although, thankfully, they have been few and far between.

We must recognise that much violent crime stems from a culture which has emerged whereby when a person or group of people go for a night out, nothing matters to them except that moment. Although it is good to live in the present moment, we must recognise that there are consequences to our actions. It is often the case that a greater degree of enlightenment or education on these issues would make a big difference to people.

I take the point made by the Minister of State regarding the sentences for crimes which may be related to knife crime and that a maximum ten-year sentence would be identical to the sentences for possession of other possibly more lethal weapons such as firearms in particular. Unfortunately, there is ample evidence that the possession and use of a knife can have terrible and dramatic consequences for people. It warrants a dramatic increase in the sentence imposed, where appropriate. However, it is not always appropriate. We acknowledge that it applies, as is stated in the Bill, “for the possession of a knife to cause injury to, incapacitate or intimidate any person”. It must be acknowledged that many people carry knives and have knives on their person for whatever job they may be engaged in. It is not always the case that a person is carrying a knife to cause injury. It comes down to the intent of people, why they carry knives and why they use them. Each case that comes before the judicial system is taken on its merits and consideration must be given to the circumstances surrounding the events that have occurred.

In the context of the Bill, it is important to shine a bright light on the relevant section of the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act. At present, the maximum sentence for crimes such as those we are discussing is five years. From the limited research I have done, I understand that the maximum sentence is seldom imposed. The vast majority of sentences for the possession of knives amount to less than one year. While this legislation provides for the sentence to be at the very high end of the scale, I expect that it will be in place more as a deterrent having regard

to the sentence that will be imposed if the Bill is enacted. Matters such as the pros and cons of what is proposed, the dangers involved and the consequences, unintended or otherwise, can be teased out on Committee Stage.

I note from the recently published crime figures that homicide and related offences are down 40%. That is a welcome development. It is a sign of the good work members of An Garda Síochána are doing in many areas in the context of crime prevention. Homicide is very much described as a “gangland” crime. I find that term difficult to use because I do not know of any particular land that has a gang. These gangs are groups of criminals who may reside in or have a particular territory. Decent, genuine and honest people who work hard in their communities live in those territories where such criminal activity is rife. In many ways, they are the victims of where they live. Most of that crime relates to the drug epidemic in our society. This epidemic must be tackled. We cannot deal with any of this without examining the reality that most of it stems from the drugs trade, from the massive amount of money being made from it and from those engaged in this activity and who terrorise the communities in which they live.

While the number of homicide and related offences is down, the number of sexual offences has risen. The number of attempts or threats to murder, assaults, incidences of harassment and related offences have also increased. The rise in this regard is 6.7%. This highlights that there is a problem with people who are engaging in harassment, threats and bullying in communities. We come across that. I have spoken to members of An Garda Síochána and I have been informed that people do not report incidents because they are afraid to do so. This is due to the fact that the communities in which they live are under threat from the very dangerous individuals to whom I refer. People have good reason to be afraid. A key element to resolving this matter is to ensure that nobody is ever handed down the sentence outlined in the Bill and also to ensure that we have an adequate police service that can keep people safe. To do the latter, we need a properly resourced community policing service. We all recognise that we need more gardaí on the streets meeting people, dealing with them and being a part of their local communities.

When I was growing up, everyone knew the sergeant in the town and also the local gardaí, some of whom helped train the football team. They were involved in their community and they knew about whatever was happening. This has changed and that change has been regressive. Many gardaí now do not live in their local communities. They live further away and they come and go and do not have that sense of connection. That has been disappointing for many people.

When I am in Dublin for a few nights each week, I stay in the north inner city. I am always conscious that it is an area which is marked out as having a high crime rate. Today, our party president, Deputy May Lou McDonald, raised the issue of the north inner city and the high crime rate there, which is five times the national average. While one may see a patrol car driving through that area now and again, one seldom sees a garda walking the streets or coming out of a shop and having a chat with a person they meet on the street. The reason for that is there are not sufficient numbers and officers are too busy. The force does not have the staff it needs to enable it to provide a community policing service. The provision of a such a service can be equated with the provision of the home help service in the health sector. If there were more people delivering the home help service, we would need fewer staff in hospitals. Likewise, if we had more gardaí in the community policing service, we would need fewer at the other end because the prospect of crime developing into an epidemic would be resolved at source. That is what we need to do and to do that we need to more gardaí on the streets better equipped and working in the local communities. That is central to what we need to do.

I commend Deputy O’Callaghan on introducing this Bill. We will support it. When the Bill progresses to Committee Stage, we will examine whether it needs to be tweaked. I am sure the Deputy will acknowledge that it may need to be amended. We want to develop the Bill into something that will be there for the long haul. The idea is to put in place a measure that will act as a deterrent in the context of violent crime. We do not want it to become the norm that people will be sentenced to long periods in jail for using knives; rather, we want communities in which this eventuality is not the norm. That is what we need to bring about.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Bill. I, too, commend Deputy O’Callaghan on bringing it forward. I wish to talk about my own constituency, which has been wrecked by high incidences of drug and knife crime. Both of these types of crime seriously affect the way ordinary people pursue their daily lives. Residents in the area recognise the pressures gardaí, particularly those who operate out of Coolock Garda station, are under. However, the response from the Government has been lacklustre, to put it mildly. The situation in my area has become a political football for some. On the one hand, we had Fine Gael local representatives shouting from the rooftops to constituents that a new Garda station was on the way while, on the other, the Minister of State’s colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, will not provide any extra resources to make that a reality.

The gardaí in my area are under increasing pressure. Part of that is down to the rapid population growth in and development of Clongriffin, which forms part of Dublin’s north fringe. While attempts to stem the growing levels of knife crime are welcome, these are just a drop in the ocean in terms of what is required to allow people to feel safe and confident in raising their families. I call on the Government to ensure that capital funding is identified and prioritised for a new station in Clongriffin along with making more resources available for gardaí based in the constituency of Dublin Bay North. We need change in areas in which there is serious crime and not just when some Ministers see bringing such change about as an election platform.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I support the legislation. I submitted a parliamentary question on 13 November 2018 and I will give the reference number for the information of the Minister of State’s officials. It was Question No. 277, reference number 46967/18. In it I asked specifically about the number of recorded knife crimes in the country. I subsequently received correspondence from the CSO, specifically from the crime and criminal justice statistics section. It stated:

The Central Statistics Office, CSO, has taken the decision to resume publication of recorded crime statistics under a new category entitled statistics under reservation. This categorisation indicates the quality of the statistics do not meet the standards required of the official statistics published by the CSO. Please see the attached explanatory link ... Knife crime would have been for crime incidents where it had been indicated that a knife was used via the *modus operandi*, MO, data field. The CSO would have concerns that figures generated in this way could understate the true figure and, as such, we are not happy to release such data.

There is a serious issue with the specific recording of knife crimes which the CSO has pointed out. Since I submitted my parliamentary question on 13 November 2018, which is not too far off a year ago, I hope there has been some improvement in the quality of the recording of the statistics in question. It would be useful if the Minister of State in his reply or his officials later could give me an update on this matter. If we are not dealing with real-time figures, we will not know the true extent of what is going on. We need a real picture of what is going on if

we are to legislate efficiently and effectively on these matters.

As an aside, there was a Topical Issue matter before this legislation was presented. It would be a vote of confidence if line Ministers were available to take individual Topical Issue matters. It would stave off much of the tension created when they are not available. My colleague, Deputy Kelly, raised an issue concerning Tipperary.

**Deputy David Stanton:** We were not physically available to take those Topical Issue matters. I apologise for that.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I am a constituency colleague of the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, and I accept his response. I do not wish to score a political point on this matter. However, there is an issue in respect of the administration of justice. The Topical Issue matter referred specifically to the new operating structures of An Garda Síochána in Tipperary. It is also a major concern in north County Cork where the new divisional Garda headquarters will be moved to Macroom. Some Deputies have genuine concerns. When a Topical Issue matter is raised, it should be dealt with by the line Minister. I have stood where the Minister of State is standing now and I fully accept his explanation in this regard. I am not being political or trying to score a point. However, I wanted merely to state it for the record.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Just to clarify, neither the line Minister nor the Minister of State were available earlier, as explained by the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton.

The norm is that if the Minister or Minister of State from the relevant Department is not available to take a Topical Issue matter, the Ceann Comhairle's office will be informed before 12 o'clock. An opportunity will then be given to the Deputy who raised the matter to defer it.

**Deputy Thomas P. Broughan:** I am delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Firearms and Offensive Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2019. This is a short Bill which will amend section 9 of the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990. Its key purpose is to increase the maximum sentence for knife crime from five years to ten years. I commend Deputy Jim O'Callaghan for bringing forward this legislation following four tragic deaths by knife attacks in Dublin this summer.

I have also been raising the serious issues of criminal and anti-social behaviour with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice and Equality, as well as writing directly to the Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris, and chief superintendents in the districts policing my constituency of Dublin Bay North. Earlier this year, the whole community in Dublin Bay North was astonished and flabbergasted after a series of murders in broad daylight. People were gunned down in cold blood, one in front of a school. A wave of terror affected the local community. Some parishes profoundly affected by these events are still trying to recover. At the time, I contacted the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice and Equality to take proactive steps. I tried to adjourn the Dáil to take an emergency debate and there were Topical Issues debates on these events in late spring and early summer. I asked the Taoiseach to look into setting up a similar commission to the Mulvey one set up for the Dublin Central constituency to deal with the desperate and dastardly crimes in certain areas of the Dublin Bay North constituency. I also called on him to deliver additional resources to hard-pressed communities.

A meeting was held to which non-Fine Gael Deputies and Ministers were not invited, which people were rightly upset about. It was the politicisation of the necessary response. I never saw that happening under previous Governments. Generally, in the past, everybody, both national

and local representatives, were always invited to such meetings. The Northside Partnership, based in Coolock, was chosen to lead an overall response to this wave of serious anti-social behaviour and criminality. Although we have got small additional numbers of gardaí, we do not see the necessary impact on the ground. For example, on a walkabout last Friday, I came across a burned-out car and bits of other burned-out vehicles in an open space amenity. Residents there told me about the horrendous drug-fuelled anti-social behaviour and crime that had occurred on the previous night.

I know this year in the run-up to Hallowe'en with Brexit, we will have several dramatic weeks ahead. Every single year since I have been in politics, the run-up to the Hallowe'en festival has been an excuse for miscreants to misbehave and terrorise communities. In the Dublin north Garda divisions, we need to see continued strong response under the Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris.

Garda figures have revealed an increase of 66% in knife seizures since 2016 with 1,200 seized in that year, 1,600 seized in 2017 and 2,000 seized in 2018. The Garda, of course, claims the increase in seizures is down to the increased number of personnel out on the beat. As Deputy Sherlock said, however, we need to examine the accuracy of statistics in this area. The CSO recorded crime figures for the second quarter of 2019 showed that the weapons and explosives offences increased by 6.6% from 2,427 in 2018 to 2,588 in 2019. Attempts or threats to murder, assaults, harassments and related offences also increased by 6.7% from 19,353 in 2018 to 20,656 in 2019.

In May, it was reported the CSO does not report on knife crime because of the lack of consistency in reporting on PULSE across different Garda stations. A working group was expected to report to the Garda executive in July on knife crime, seizures and assaults against the person. Has the working group completed its report? Will this legislation fit with its recommendations?

I note the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran, is calling for a knife amnesty. I agree we need another weapons amnesty. We had a weapons amnesty in the past. We had one in 2006, which the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, will remember because we were both in the House at the time. That amnesty resulted in hundreds of firearms, knives and swords being handed in to An Garda Síochána. Replica firearms and a grenade were also handed in at that time. Of course, it was before the Criminal Justice Act 2006. We gave a last chance to those who had offensive weapons to bring them in.

The Taoiseach repeated this morning that he was a follower of the old Blairite policy of being tough on crime, and tough on the causes of crime. It was always my policy when I was spokesperson in the Labour Party that one must deal with both. One must stop bad behaviour, anti-social behaviour and criminality, nip it in the bud before it starts or at the very earliest opportunity, and then try to put in the resources to help young people to lead normal lives.

It must be asked why young men and male teenagers carry knives and knife-like weapons. We have seen many reports from London, including a fine report recently on the BBC's "Newsnight", about the devastation that the carrying of knives is doing, particularly in south London and in other areas of the UK. Obviously, tougher penalties are necessary but we also need steps to be taken by community policing teams to increase their presence, approachability and helpfulness.

I do not know whether Deputy O'Callaghan has been in touch with anybody who represents

the manufacturers of these weapons. There are manufacturers and suppliers and even people who supply these weapons on the web. Why do we need a long-bladed knife or a flick-knife? Why should such a product exist? There is a responsibility on businesses, especially in other member states of the European Union and in the UK, to address this.

As I said, we have heard many stories from the UK about increases in knife seizures and crime over a number of years. In the 12 months up to the end of March this year, there had been astonishingly more than 43,500 knife crime offences in the UK, which is 80% higher than in 2014. The 44 police forces across the UK are coming up against this major problem.

Deputy O’Callaghan’s Bill is timely and important. We need to address this and deal with it as soon as possible. I commend Deputy O’Callaghan and his Fianna Fáil colleagues on coming forward with this Bill, which we should speedily enact.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We move now to the Rural Independent Group.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I commend Deputy O’Callaghan on bringing forward this important legislation and for highlighting what is a growing menace in society, namely, knife crime. I found it disturbing to hear Deputy O’Callaghan refer during his First Stage introduction of the Bill to the fact that the number of knives seized by An Garda Síochána has increased by 66% since 2016. In 2017, 1,600 knives were seized by An Garda Síochána and in 2018, 2,000 knives were seized. Clearly, the problem is getting much worse. Our response must be proportionate. We must ensure that we do not end up capturing with endless procedures those who must use or carry knives as a legitimate part of their job. That is, I suppose, part of the difficulty.

I note that the Bill before us is quite specific in that it relates to the possession of a flick-knife or any other article made or adapted for use in order to cause injury to or to incapacitate a person. That is an important distinction and I am glad it is included.

This issue, while of course about the law, is also about the culture we live in today and that we are creating. We must ask ourselves what is leading to the emergence of a more dangerous and more violent society. Why is it that an increasing number of young people feel it necessary to carry deadly weapons, such as knives? No doubt there has been a general degrading of the value of human life. We cannot pretend that this will not have an impact because it has. This is as much an educational and values issues as it is a legal one. I hope that we can bear that in mind when debating this Bill and when it goes forward to Committee Stage. We must try to gain an understanding of what in society is creating such violence and the staggering figures I quoted of the number of knives seized in the past two years. As I said, it is an educational issue.

We also need to ensure gardaí are given enough of those so-called “knife-vests” to protect themselves in the course of their duties. People in Tipperary and in many other areas are always looking for extra gardaí and extra resources. In that regard, we are badly served. I have taken issue with the removal of the district headquarters from Thurles. However, we must give the Garda the tools of the trade across a wide spectrum of issues to ensure they are able to carry out their duties without fear or favour, and that they can be safe, and that their families and loved ones will know that they are safe, when they go on duty on the front line. We must never forget that there is a thin line between them and us and they must try to protect us at all times.

Perhaps the Minister of State might confirm that this will be a part of his response to the growth of this worrying phenomenon.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I compliment Deputy O'Callaghan and his Fianna Fáil colleagues on bringing this important Bill before the House.

First, we must look at the people in control of law and order, namely, the gardaí. No member of the Garda or, for that matter, anyone else should ever have to be faced with a person in possession of a knife, whether for threatening purposes or menacing purposes, or for wanting to do harm to another person. Therefore, the law on the carrying of knives should be tightened up.

The one area I would be careful of and of which Deputy O'Callaghan is acutely aware, as are all his Fianna Fáil colleagues and all of us supporting this, is that there are categories of person who must have a knife in their pocket when they do their work. The Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, will be aware of this. In making legislation, we must be acutely aware of that. I would go so far as to say that there are persons for whom, if they did not have a knife in their pocket when they needed it, it could result in serious harm being done to themselves. They may need to take out a knife to cut a rope holding a gate where there was a problem. At home at the weekends, one would not be without a knife in one's pocket.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** To cut the bale of turf.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Exactly, or to cut something that could be causing a problem.

Let us make this comparison. Why would a person walking along Grafton Street have a big knife or a dangerous knife in his or her pocket? There would be no requirement whatsoever for that. Of course, in introducing a Bill and bringing it before the House, one must be conscious of persons, such as fishermen, farmers or contractors, who might need a knife in their possession at all times, as I say, merely for the purpose of doing work and ordinary jobs for which a knife is required. We must acknowledge that and make sure we allow for that.

The message must go out, loud and clear, around Ireland that what Deputy O'Callaghan is trying to do is protect citizens. Whether it be the shopkeeper, the garda on the street or the person who may be moving money from their business, no one should be threatened by a menacing person with a knife. We must legislate to deal with such situations so that gardaí investigating crimes know the strong arm of the law will come down on those who unlawfully carry large or small knives for menacing purposes while at the same time acknowledge that they are required by others for work.

I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for bringing this important issue to the floor of the Dáil.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this important Bill. I compliment Deputy O'Callaghan on bringing it forward. We hear every day of knife crime and it is on the increase. We have to ask ourselves why. Many believe that it is because of drugs and that it is used by these villains who supply and are in command of drugs and who are destroying our communities. We hear so much of it every day. I know it will be difficult for the Garda to apprehend these fellows. I believe now it is coming close to the time when the gardaí themselves have to be armed because the criminals going around now are getting more serious and are more dangerous. There seems to be more of them. In that regard, we must have ways of dealing with them and, when these fellows are apprehended, it should not be deemed to be a minor offence if they are found with dangerous knives. I was listening to the previous speakers about fellows having knives and I can tell them that my father always carried a pen knife that was certainly well edged and if he gave it to one of us he would be looking for it back. I can honestly say that for most of the time he was here he had a small pen knife in his coat pocket

because he was used to having it, and would have had it at all times in his pocket. To go back to the serious aspect of knife crime, there is more of it and it is timely that we do something about it. We all support Deputy O'Callaghan's Bill and hope good will come of it because we need to protect our citizens; that is one of the reasons we are here.

**Deputy John Curran:** I am sharing time with Deputies Donnelly and Lahart. I compliment Deputy O'Callaghan on bringing forward this important legislation. It is straightforward and specific. The purpose of the Bill is to deter the carrying of knives by increasing from five to ten years the sentence that can be imposed. It is apparent that in recent years the incidence of knives being used in crime has increased significantly. It is disappointing to learn that the CSO does not keep figures on this. That is because of issues it has around the PULSE system whereby it states the data would be inaccurate. While I have a note that clearly shows a number of people who died in Dublin in the past few months as a result of knife attacks, I do not intend putting them on the record of the House. I do not think it is fair to their families. They are known to us and we have read about them in the papers. Predominantly in Dublin, but also in other parts of the country, people have lost their lives in recent months due to serious knife attacks. If we look at the statistics that are available from An Garda Síochána, while they do not measure the crime, the Garda has talked about the knives seized and the figures have increased by about 400 seizures per annum. Deputy Broughan suggested that it might be because there are more gardaí on the streets. I beg to differ. I believe it is because there are more knives in circulation. That is a significant point.

It is my view that this legislation should be fast-tracked. It may not be our party position but it is my own strong position and view that the Bill should be also accompanied by a knife amnesty. The Garda is well aware there is a growing problem. It has established a working group to formulate a national strategy to deal with assaults against the person. An Garda Síochána has included knife crime as part of that work. The working group will monitor the prevalence and frequency of individuals carrying knives or knife-like instruments and will devise a strategy. The Garda is acutely aware of the growing issue of knives and knife crime. This legislation will act with it and it would be timely, in parallel with the legislation, that the Government would give serious consideration to implementing a knife amnesty. There is no point just increasing the penalty without the general population realising that possession of a knife is a serious offence and the sentence will reflect that.

I am also of the strong view that a lot of this is related to gangland crime associated with the drugs business. I do not think the figures will ever reflect what is going on in reality. The reality is that many young people are carrying knives. They are using them in a threatening and menacing way and I do not believe those incidents are always reflected in reports to An Garda Síochána or in the figures the Garda might have on PULSE.

I ask the Minister of State to support this actively and to see if it can be fast-tracked. We do not want to end up in the situation we have seen in the UK, which is worse than here. This Bill, accompanied by an awareness that we have now made this a much more serious offence and by an amnesty on knives to afford those who have them an opportunity to dispose of them through Garda stations, would be a comprehensive package in tackling the scourge of knife crime.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I congratulate Deputy O'Callaghan on introducing this Bill. It is one of a number of measures he is leading on behalf of Fianna Fáil to deal with some worrying changes in our society, including increases in crime, intimidation and violent crime. While the CSO does not report detailed figures on knife crime for various reasons, it is pretty clear

that things are moving in the wrong direction. We can look, as various Deputies have, at the increased number of seizures, up from 1,200 to 2,000 in just two years. That is an extraordinary increase. We know that in many of these trends we follow the UK, and that it has become a most serious issue there. Everyone in this House knows, from representing our constituents, that there is an increased level of fear and of weapons being produced in violent incidents. I have been looking at this in detail for Wicklow over the last while, since I was at a joint policing committee meeting, and the figures are really worrying. Rape and sexual assaults are up by a third in one year. Burglaries are up by a third in one year. Drug sales and supply are up by a half in one year. Shoplifting is up by a half in one year. When I talk to gardaí, retailers, citizens and community groups they are saying two things again and again. The number of gardaí has been depleted to an unsustainably low level and the resources they have are unsustainably low. It is in the power of the Government to do something about that. It has to be looked at. We have a situation where we know a lot of gardaí will get pulled up to the Border region. It is entirely likely that is going to happen. We have to consider accelerating the number of gardaí we are deploying around the country and in my case out to Wicklow. I am not even going to put on the record the depletion in the numbers but it is not pretty and it has led directly to increases in crime and violent crime all over Wicklow and, I am sure, all over the country.

The second issue coming up again and again is drugs. People are telling me that they have become prevalent and that drug dealing is happening in the open in the middle of the day in a way it never has before in this country. What that says to everyone in a town or village who sees these open acts of criminality is that the State is not here to protect them and the Garda does not have the resources to protect them. If that is allowed happen, God knows what else can happen. It tells people they are not safe and none of us wants that. I am not making any political points here. No one in this House wants that to happen. I appeal to the Government that whatever its ambitions are to add more gardaí, some of which was agreed through confidence and supply, we have to go further. In some areas at least we are losing the fight and it is not a fight we can ever lose. I compliment Deputy O'Callaghan and hope the Government will not just accept but champion this Bill and bring it forward. It does something very reasonable. It does not set a mandatory sentence of ten years; it provides that the maximum sentence can be up to ten years. We need to send out a strong signal that it is not okay to walk around this country carrying deadly weapons with the intent to hurt, maim and stab people.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I join my colleagues in commending Deputy O'Callaghan for bringing this legislation forward. I wish to share with the House some correspondence that I entered into with the Garda Commissioner's office on foot of the Christchurch, New Zealand massacre regarding the use of semi-automatic weapons. I put down a few questions and got comprehensive replies. I asked initially when legislation was last introduced concerning firearms and, given it has been ten years, it is timely we are looking at these offensive weapons. I again commend my colleague on allowing us the opportunity to do this.

One of the questions I asked was how many semi-automatic centre-fire rifles - that is, larger calibre, military-style rifles - are currently licensed in this jurisdiction and how many semi-automatic rifles in smaller calibres such as .22 are currently licensed. I was told that a new category of firearms certificate, namely, a restricted firearms certificate, was introduced in the legislation in 2009. Of the approximately 53,408 rifles currently licensed in the State as of May this year, only 263 fall into the restricted category. The majority of these 263 restricted rifles are predominantly licensed for the purpose of recreational target practice at authorised shooting ranges, which are very strictly regulated. The point is that these are the types of weapons

that were used in the Christchurch attacks in New Zealand. As I said, the majority of these 263 restricted rifles are licensed for the purposes of recreational target practice. However, I am told these firearms are not kept or stored in clubs and the individual owner brings these rifles to the clubs. For the remainder of the time, they are kept in the private possession of the individual owner. This is exactly what happened in Christchurch. They are free to access them at any time, as was the case with the perpetrator of the New Zealand assault. They are military-style, high-capacity, semi-automatic weapons and have no real application in a sporting sense. While it may seem a small figure, there are more than 260 of them in the hands of individuals in Ireland. I believe they should not be just regulated or restricted; they should be banned.

The final question I asked was in regard to whether gun licence holders have to undergo any form of mental health vetting or Garda vetting prior to being licensed and, if so, what is the nature of such vetting. The Minister of State might clarify that point. The general answer I get is that each application for a firearms certificate is considered on its individual merits by an issuing person, so there does not seem to be any great series of hoops a person who has one of these has to go through. That ought to be looked at, possibly in the context of this Bill and, if necessary, there should be further restrictions or tightening. It seems to be at the discretion of the issuing person involved. The Minister might take on board some of those suggestions.

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Canney):** I want to deal with some of the points that were raised. With regard to the CSO statistics on knife crime, while it is true the CSO does not currently record the statistics on knife crime, it is hoped the improved Garda IT system will mean the recording will meet CSO standards. The recording of knife crime statistics is also being considered by a high level working group.

In regard to issues of Government policy on Garda numbers, as the House is aware, the Government is totally committed to ensuring a strong and visible police presence throughout the country in order to maintain and strengthen community engagement, to provide reassurance to citizens and to deter crime. The evidence of this commitment is not difficult to find. Since the reopening of the Garda College in 2014, almost 2,400 recruits have attested as members of An Garda Síochána and been assigned to mainstream duties nationwide. This accelerated recruitment of gardaí saw Garda numbers reach almost 14,000 by the end of 2018, with Garda numbers expected to be in the region of 21,000 by 2021. Furthermore, a total budget of €1.76 billion has been provided to An Garda Síochána in 2019, an increase of more than €100 million on the 2018 allocation. This substantial investment will provide new and cutting-edge technology to support front-line gardaí in carrying out their work in both rural and urban areas.

The programme for Government underlines the need for close engagement between An Garda Síochána and local communities, and this is an essential feature of the strong community policing ethos which has long been central to policing in this jurisdiction. As part of the overall strategy to tackle criminality, the Garda authorities pursue a range of partnership initiatives with important rural-based organisations such as the IFA, Muintir na Tire and other community organisations. These partnerships are very valuable and I want to thank the organisations involved.

The Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, has listened to all of the interventions from Deputies. While knife crime accounts for a small percentage of total assaults, nonetheless, I know it can have serious and devastating consequences for families. The Government's response to crime is focused on two main objectives, the first being investment in the Garda Síochána. As

mentioned earlier, a new nationwide initiative has been put in place by the Garda to reduce the number of assaults and fear of assaults, and to make public places safer. This is a multi-strand operation, with a pro-arrest, early intervention, proactive, high-visibility policing focus. The second objective is the strengthening of the law, where it is necessary to do so. In that regard, the Minister is open to considering the case for increased penalties for the possession of knives and other offensive weapons and, as such, we do not oppose Deputy O'Callaghan's Bill, on which we compliment him. We will engage with him in regard to the range of penalties proposed.

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** Like others, I want to compliment Deputy O'Callaghan. Any time I have approached him on any issue, but particularly on this issue, he has always had a listening ear. It is long past time this issue was addressed. I have spoken about the need for mandatory sentencing for those convicted of causing incapacity, or injuring or intimidating, with the use of a knife, who should face the full rigour of the law. I welcome this Bill and the clauses to increase the fines and sentences imposed for offences committed.

I have always said the punishment must fit the crime. We have heard here this afternoon from my colleagues about the current figures for crime, in particular knife crime, across the country. Outside of the capital, Louth ranks as above average in crime rates, and this is not just attributable to what is going on in the drug feud in Drogheda. On 12 August 2019, we witnessed the barbaric stabbing in Blackrock of Donie Lynch, a 93 year old, innocent man going about his business, who was badly injured and had to spend a long time in hospital in recovery. His wife was also present and was terrorised. Donie is a good friend of mine. It is awful to reach the old age of 93 and to be attacked in such a vicious way. Perpetrators of such crimes have absolutely no conscience and need further deterrence. When I see incidences like this in my own locality, I believe stronger sentences should be mandatory where conviction occurs.

This is not an isolated case, and other Deputies have spoken about the situation in their constituencies. On 30 August 2019, a man in Oakland Park, Dundalk, was stabbed in the back. On 26 August 2019, a man was arrested in Ashbrook Park, Dundalk, with a knife found in his possession. On 18 September 2018, a young woman in Dundalk died following a stabbing incident. On 4 January 2018, Yosuke Sasaki, a young Japanese man working in Dundalk, was stabbed to death on Avenue Road, Dundalk. It is a small town but this is comparable with what is going on in Dublin in terms of its population. Only last week, there was a vicious attack on a garda in Dundalk, where his face was slashed not with a knife but with a garden trowel which, equally, is an offensive weapon when used for the wrong reasons. These crimes are causing serious concern to my constituents and they all happened within a few kilometres of where I live. All of this is coupled with the ongoing feud in Drogheda, which has seen 76 incidents. People in my constituency want to see greater punishment for these criminal offences.

The purpose of the Bill is to deter people from carrying knives by increasing the maximum sentence for knife crime, and I welcome that. It is a no-brainer, and I hope it will deter when implemented. There is a knife crime epidemic, as can be seen from what I have outlined in respect of my locality, which is a microcosm of what is happening elsewhere. These deterrents need to be strengthened.

I will outline what the granddaughter of Donie Lynch stated after her grandfather was stabbed:

The person who did this has robbed my grandparents of security, peace of mind and quality of life. It takes decades to get over something like this, but at their age, they don't have long. How desperately sad this is after having such a wonderful long life together to be forced to live in fear, think twice before opening the door, worry and feel anxiety [that they do not need] in their final years.

She concluded by saying, "I really really really hope the Judiciary take this very human aspect into consideration when making any decision in knife offence crimes that come before them."

I am glad to hear that the Government will not oppose the Bill and that we can send out a united message from the House condemning knife crime, ensuring that our voices are in unison and that the offenders will face the full rigours of the law. I welcome the introduction of an amnesty not just for knives but for all offensive weapons. People should be given an opportunity to hand in such weapons.

**Deputy James Browne:** I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for bringing forward the Bill, which aims to increase the penalty for the carrying of a knife for criminal purposes. Knife crime is a serious and growing crime. The message needs to go out from here that the carrying of a knife for criminal purposes is not acceptable and that anyone who does so will suffer the consequences. There is a serious culture of knife crime in the UK and, regrettably, there is a growing culture here too, albeit only beginning. The UK experience is that knife crime is contagious: when some people begin to carry knives, others feel they need to carry them as well. This is why this culture needs to be stopped now. Young people must be turned away from crime through early intervention with appropriate supports. For young people we need a meaningful public health approach that can address knife crime and its causes. UK research highlights that young people who use knives often believe they are carrying knives for self-defence purposes. They fear being the victim of bullying or attacks. Very often, however, such a situation ends up in tragic circumstances for others and for themselves. Whatever the reason, there must be no tolerance of knife crime.

This Fianna Fáil Bill, which increases the penalty for knife crime from five years to ten years, will send out a very strong message but will not solve the problem alone. The greatest deterrent is not the length of a sentence but the belief that one will be caught. The problem today is that many criminals do not fear being caught. This is why we need to see more community policing, more boots on the ground and an increased Garda presence on the streets and in our housing estates. People are entitled to feel safe in their homes, in their places of work and while out and about doing their business. Increasingly, they do not feel safe. Young people are often afraid to go out; older people are afraid to stay in. Let us all work together to make people feel safer.

I will finish by highlighting the victims of knife violence. We need to think about victim support for those who are the subjects of attacks and those who witness attacks. The scars of a knife attack, both physical and mental, can stay for a very long time - long after the assault, long after any court case and long after the perpetrator has served any sentence.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. It has been very beneficial. I note what the Minister of State said and some of his suggestions. We will give consideration to what he said. It is appropriate that the legislation is not steamrolled through but we will give it consideration when it comes before the Committee on Justice and

Equality.

Many Members spoke about the fact that there is a deficiency in our statistics. We need to look at that. It would be beneficial if we had accurate information on the use of knives in assaults, which at present we do not have.

The Minister of State referred to sections 10 and 11 of the 1990 Act and said there may be an anomaly if the offences under those sections were left with penalties of up to five years and we were to increase the penalty for knife crime to up to ten years. We can look at that and would be happy to take the Minister of State's comments on board by also amending the penalties for the offences under sections 10 and 11 of the 1990 Act.

A number of colleagues spoke about the necessity to send out a message that this is a deterrent to people carrying knives. That is an important contribution.

A number of colleagues spoke about a knife amnesty. I think this would be a good idea, but if there is to be an amnesty for something, there must be a more severe deterrent for people who do not abide by or avail of the amnesty. This is why I think, as Deputy Curran said, this legislation would be very useful if accompanied by an amnesty. The two elements would probably complement each other.

I am conscious that my colleagues from the Rural Independent Group mentioned that people sometimes need to carry knives for a lawful purpose. I fully accept that. The purpose of this legislation is to deal with a specific crime, which is the carrying of a knife for the purpose of inflicting damage and harm on another person. The legislation would, therefore, not apply to the circumstances Deputy Michael Healy-Rae mentioned when he talked about the fisherman who would need to carry a knife. Obviously, such a person is not affected by this legislation in the slightest.

I thank Members for their contributions. They reflect a concern in our society about the growing levels of assault and what we hear anecdotally about the increased use of knives.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I understand that the Chief Whip has a proposal for tomorrow's business to put to the House.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne):** It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or the Order of Business on 1 October, that statements on the development of a liquefied natural gas, LNG, facility in Ireland shall be taken after the weekly divisions tomorrow. The statements shall conclude within 85 minutes and the sitting shall suspend after the statements for 40 minutes in accordance with Standing Order 25(1). Statements shall be confined to a single round for a Minister or Minister of State and the main party and group spokespersons, or Members nominated in their stead, and shall not exceed ten minutes each, with a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

### **Industrial Action by School Secretaries: Statements**

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the issue of school secretaries and caretakers. I recognise the very important work these staff and the other support staff carry out in the running of our schools. In my time as Minister and beforehand, I have spoken to a number of school secretaries about their employment conditions and I understand the issues they have raised.

Earlier this year I relaxed the moratorium for those community and comprehensive and education and training board, ETB, schools with enrolments of 700 and more. This allows them to employ additional school secretaries up to a maximum of two per school. There are 91 schools in the community and comprehensive and ETB sector that meet this criterion, based on the information currently available to this Department. This is an initial step and has taken immediate effect.

To outline the background to the issue, schemes were initiated in 1978 and 1979 for the employment of clerical officers and caretakers in schools. The schemes were later withdrawn in 2008. These schemes have been superseded by the more extensive capitation grant schemes. The current grant scheme was agreed in the context of the Programme for Economic and Social Progress published in 1991. The majority of primary and voluntary secondary schools now receive assistance to provide for secretarial, caretaker and cleaning services under these grant schemes. It is a matter for the individual school to decide how best to apply the grant funding to suit its particular needs.

The scheme offers much greater flexibility to schools to manage their resource requirements. The level and extent of services provided are a matter for the school authorities which, through the discretion afforded under the scheme, apply diverse arrangements for secretarial and caretaker services as resources permit. Where a school uses the grant funding for caretaker or secretarial purposes, staff taken on to support those functions are employees of individual schools. Terms of employment, including the type of contract that best meets the school's requirements, are agreed directly between the school as the employer and individual employees. Boards of management are obliged to comply with employment legislation in the same manner as any other employer in the State.

My Department has made significant efforts in recent years to improve the pay of school secretaries and caretakers who are employed using capitation grant assistance. On foot of a chairman's note to the Lansdowne Road agreement, my Department engaged with the unions representing school secretaries and caretakers. This engagement included an independent arbitration process in 2015 under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission. The arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 for staff and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period. The arbitrator's recommendations were accepted by both sides and the various measures have been implemented to date. This arbitration agreement covers the period up to 31 December 2019.

Following the arbitration process, grant funding used by schools to fund the salaries of

ancillary staff is being improved on a phased basis between 2016 and 2019 to enable schools to implement the arbitration outcome. Schools received a 5% increase in capitation from September 2019. Over the course of the school year 2019-20, an additional €10 million will be allocated to primary and post-primary schools, of which €4 million will be allocated in 2019. The arbitration agreement was designed to be of greatest benefit to lower paid secretaries and caretakers. For example, a secretary or caretaker who was paid the then minimum wage of €8.65 per hour in 2015 prior to the arbitration was, from 1 January 2019, paid €13 per hour, which is a 50% increase in that individual's hourly pay. The annual full year cost of the measures recommended by the arbitrator is €22.5 million.

In these circumstances the current industrial action by Fórsa members is considered unwarranted, not least because the period of the current arbitration agreement has not expired. Officials from my Department met Fórsa representatives in September. Management bodies representing the employer schools impacted by the action were also in attendance at the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to explore the details of the pay claim as presented by Fórsa and the nature of the industrial action. The Department restated to the trade union that its claim will be fully considered once the current costings have been determined on completion of the surveys.

On Monday, 30 September, Fórsa requested that my officials agree to use the services of the Workplace Relations Commission in an effort to resolve this dispute. Standard practice in industrial relations procedures would be for any action to be suspended once it is agreed to refer a dispute to the WRC. Fórsa's request is under consideration and my officials will respond to the union shortly. As the union has previously been advised, the Department remains open to having further dialogue with Fórsa. I urge Fórsa to call off its industrial action to allow space for that process to take place.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** When will the Minister receive the final surveys from the schools?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy will have an opportunity to speak later.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** He does not have that in his statement.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** If that information is available, the Minister might provide it.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Fianna Fáil has consistently voiced its support for school secretaries and caretakers. We have organised meetings with our parliamentary party and the representatives have organised briefings for the Oireachtas. Our Deputies have voiced support at public meetings across the country. The position in which secretaries and caretakers find themselves is manifestly unfair and a pathway to address it must be developed.

Secretaries employed directly by the Department of Education and Skills can earn double or even treble what is earned by those employed directly by other schools. The irony is that in the school plebiscites taking place at present, where an ETB is selected as the patron of the school, a secretary employed in that school will be a State employee with a reasonably good salary, pension rights and Civil Service terms. That is not the case if Educate Together, the Catholic Church or a Gaelscoil, not an ETB, is the patron. The situation is particularly galling in the context of the role that secretaries play in schools. They are vital for providing the Department of Education and Skills with the information it requires on a host of issues. Perhaps the Minister will address what impact the industrial action is having on the gathering of information by the Department. In some cases, it is only the secretary who has access to particular databases.

It is deeply disappointing that school secretaries have been forced to engage in industrial action. We do not wish to see it happening but it is due to the failure to engage by the Government. The Minister outlined the arbitration that started in 2015 and concludes this year but he did not clarify what else is in the arbitrator's decision, which is that the Government would engage this year with a view to putting a new arrangement in place from January 2020. That is what this debate is about. If meaningful talks were taking place between the Department and Fórsa, I doubt that Fórsa and the secretaries would have an issue.

When a strike or industrial action occurs in the private sector, one will hear Ministers pontificating that the industrial relations mechanisms of the State must be used and that they are available to all the parties. In this case, Fórsa has asked the Department to go to the WRC to discuss this, but the Minister's reply today is extremely disappointing. He says his officials are considering the matter. All Fianna Fáil is seeking is that the Minister talk to the union about this. Talks always happen. The Government appears to allow situations to fester and eventually it gives in to talks. These are talks about something it was asked to do four years ago. The Government has made the situation worse in recent days by mischaracterising the nature of the dispute and insinuating a potential cost to the State of hundreds of millions of euro per year.

The secretaries I have met on the protest - I would not even call it a picket line - are lonely voices. They are surprised and delighted to be joined by SNAs and teachers at the doors. They are brave people who, in some cases, went out alone to start a picket. I strongly urge secretaries who are not members of a trade union to join one. Fórsa is the one that is taking this action but there are other trade unions. They should join one because the secretaries who are members of a union and taking this action are fighting for their rights. It is ironic that in possibly the most heavily unionised sector in the State secretaries are a lonely voice and many are not unionised. I think they should join a union. Our understanding is that Fórsa has asked the Minister to use the services of the Workplace Relations Commission. That needs to happen as soon as possible. If it happens, we will let the Minister have the space for it, as we always have done with industrial disputes. He should get the talking started.

**Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin:** I wish to put on record my appreciation and gratitude to the secretaries and caretakers in our schools, who do a wonderful job and in many cases are the heartbeat of their schools. In the school where I served as a teacher, Noreen, the secretary, had three different principals and provided continuity from one to the other, as well as between teachers and principals and between students and parents. She is not alone in that. Through my role as a public representative, I have had occasion to visit many schools to see the incredible co-ordination work a secretary has to do. They are often the longest-serving member of staff and are often the most trusted and indispensable member. However, under the current model of employment they are the most neglected and this is not good enough.

The Minister said he wanted to support school secretaries and he makes the right noises about addressing the issue constructively. However, we have not seen any action to date. This is a matter of huge concern as 90% of our school secretaries are not recognised for the vital work they do. They are not in a pension scheme, are not paid for summer holidays and do not know from one year to the next how they stand. Given the challenges schools have, we need to be able to support the heartbeat of the school, that is, the secretary and the caretaker. They need to be treated with the same respect as are the 10% employed by the Department of Education and Skills.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I am delighted to be able to speak in support of school secre-

taries. All public representatives, as well as anybody who has interaction with schools, whether they are parents or members of the community, will know the unbelievable amount of work school secretaries do. They are the rock within the school, they facilitate communication between parents and schools and they keep the school going. We have to make sure we take seriously the work of school secretaries and caretakers.

The debate is whether they are employed by the Department or another body. As sure as night follows day, a case will be taken and the Government and the State will have to open up to their responsibilities around employing school secretaries. We have to look for better conditions for these workers because they are a vital cog in our education community. Many other groups fall into this category and if it is not taken seriously and proper employment conditions not given to them, there will be a ruling against the State which will cost us enormously.

**Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony:** School secretaries are the engine room of any school. They keep things working, ticking over and gelling together. They epitomise the jack of all trades except that they are also masters of all trades. I have had many dealings with school secretaries over the years at my son's schools and in schools across west Cork where I worked. They really keep the show on the road and it is so unfair that they are paid differently depending on who employs them. It is very hard on the secretaries who are not paid as well as those in other schools or, indeed, in their own school.

I ask the Minister to look at this. I acknowledge every school secretary and caretaker for the trojan work they do and I thank them for it.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Nothing moves in a school without the school secretary or caretaker knowing about it. The jobs they do vary enormously, from correspondence and telephone calls to welcoming guests and inputting menus for school lunches. If a child is hurt they go to the secretary. The school would grind to a complete halt without them and the caretakers.

There is enormous inequality among school secretaries and between school secretaries and other employments. The variation in pay is enormous and many do not qualify for pension entitlements, which is appalling. This is replicated in other parts of the public sector, often where the Government has been trying to get out of paying by saying it is not the employer, such as in the case of community employment scheme, CE, supervisors. It constantly states it is not the employer, despite the fact that these employments have been created by the State and the money has been provided for them by the State. They are employees of the State in all but name. Many who are thinking ahead to retirement are very concerned as to how they are going to manage. For many school secretaries, this is not just about fairness but potential hardship. Their incomes are so limited that they are very concerned and they need this to be fixed, which is what they deserve.

Protests are happening at 250 schools around the country and some 1,000 schools are affected. I commend all those involved. It is very difficult and credit is due to Fórsa as it is a difficult area in which to organise. Credit is due to the secretaries who got involved in the campaign and in the industrial action to stand up for their rights. This has gone on for far too long, in fact for decades. The Minister previously referred to the various Ministers who have been over this area but who failed to address it. I hope the current Minister is the Minister to address it. Some secretaries are earning €12,500 per year, which is absolutely appalling. They are on irregular short-term contracts which force them to sign on during the summer holidays. A few

hundred are paid directly by the Department but the majority of the 3,500 school secretaries are paid through the annual ancillary grant that is awarded to schools by the Department. In our alternative budget, which we launched yesterday morning, we allocated €7 million to this issue, which will work towards pay equality for school secretaries. However, we need to go far beyond that and I hope the Department addresses this in the budget coming up in the next week.

People give out about public sector pay at times but it should be a matter of pride for the State to pay its employees well. We should be proud of paying public servants well and fairly but these secretaries are not paid well, fairly or proportionally to the work they do. There is huge inequality and there are issues relating to pensions, all of which need to be fixed.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** No one can question the unique and valued position of the school secretary and our schools cannot function without them. Our education system needs them. I doubt this will be disputed by anybody. Even by just sitting with a child who might have been called to the office to be given bad news or a child who is going home sick, secretaries perform a role that a teacher managing dozens of children in a classroom cannot perform.

The Department of Education and Skills has failed to seriously engage with school staff or the trade union to resolve this issue. The Department states that schools must pay their secretaries through the capitation grant, which is a farce. One cannot ask schools to juggle the cost of heating, lighting and paying staff. It leaves these workers in an unsustainable position of low pay, with no holiday or sick pay, no real job security and no access to the public service salary scale. This is not the school's fault. The fault lies squarely at the feet of the Government which is being penny wise and pound foolish. It has allowed these workers to fall through the cracks and is denying them fair pay and conditions while wasting hundreds of millions of euro through mismanagement of large capital projects. I am proud to stand with the school secretaries.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** School secretaries have my full support and that of Sinn Féin. Many Members have mentioned that secretaries are probably the first port of call for any situation. As parents, we have all phoned the school seeking assistance and it is always the school secretary who answers. Many points have been made about equality in wages and fair pay. This issue has been ongoing since 1978 and it still has not been sorted out. It is about fairness and equality within the workplace. Schools and the education system need secretaries. Inequality always causes friction. I do not know if previous speakers mentioned parity between capitation grants and what capitation is supposed to be used for. It is totally unacceptable to force schools to choose between secure pay and conditions for secretaries, heating the school or paying for the lighting in the year ahead. We have not learned anything since 1978. Previous speakers mentioned very low pay and the absence of holiday and sick pay. The greatest worry for school secretaries is the lack of job security. The service they provide in schools and the education system is priceless and vital. It complements the education system and builds trust in the system and schools. The Government does not recognise that. It must give secretaries what they are entitled to, namely, fairness and equality. They play an invaluable role in the educational sector, the community and our towns, villages and cities. I commend school secretaries and wish and pray that this issue will be sorted for the betterment of everybody.

**Deputy John Brady:** I stood with the secretaries of a number of schools in Wicklow, including St. Cronan's national school in Bray, and St. Brigid's and St. Kevin's national schools in Greystones. The regard in which the secretaries are held was evident because the parents, pupils and teachers stood with them in solidarity and support. They know the role the secretaries provide in their schools. They are the glue that holds the fabric of our education system

together. Many words about school secretaries being critical have echoed across the Chamber but unfortunately that sentiment will not get us to where we want to be. All of the compliments are deserved but they are not reflected in the way school secretaries are treated. Secretaries do not have access to holiday pay or sick pay. They have no job security and no way to progress on any sort of pay scale. They have no access to an occupational pension in retirement. For all of the praise from Government, what do secretaries have to show for it? They have little or nothing. For far too long, school secretaries have been exploited. I do not use that word lightly but this exploitation by successive Governments needs to end.

The actions taken by the Government on this issue to date have not been genuine. I do not say that lightly either. The recent survey by the Department of Education and Skills was announced over the summer and the documents were sent to the schools just as they were returning for the new term after the summer, which is the busiest time of year. The Department did this knowing full well that this would delay action being taken in budget 2020. Sinn Féin has made provision in our alternative budget to address this issue. It is interesting and welcome to hear Fianna Fáil Deputies speak so highly of school secretaries. We know the arrangement in this House is that Fianna Fáil is propping up Fine Gael in government. The party will have a critical role in the formation of the budget to be delivered next week. I hope it will follow through on the words and sentiments its Deputies expressed in this Chamber and ensure the discrimination against school secretaries is corrected in the budget next week.

**Deputy Joan Burton:** On behalf of the Labour Party, I strongly support the campaign by Fórsa and welcome the support of the INTO for the campaign to have a just wage and terms of pay and conditions for school secretaries. In practice, the school secretary is one of the first people that children and parents get to know when a child goes to school. That applies at primary and secondary level. They are a key part of the school community and the culture of the school and they are welcoming to children, especially in the early years, and their parents. They are indispensable to the school leadership team. The Department of Education and Skills, in trying to improve our education system and the opportunities and quality of education available to our children, has made school leadership a key concept. The school secretary is critical to the school leadership team. It is a false economy on the part of the Minister to cavil at upgrading the terms and conditions of the school secretary.

I have been reading the figures on the country's income up to 30 September, which were just published by the Minister for Finance. It will come as good news to the Minister that the economy is doing very well because most workers are getting a pay increase of between 2% and 3% a year, while tax bands and allowances have not expanded. Most workers are paying more taxes, as shown in the income tax receipts declared for the nine months to 30 September. I believe there would be all-party agreement in the House if part of what workers and taxpayers have contributed to the growing tax base for the first nine months of 2019 was devoted to righting the situation of school secretaries. We should pay school secretaries not just a minimum wage but a living wage and more. Their pay should take into account their devotion to their work and productivity and their almost unquantifiable contribution to the social fabric of the school, including the welcome and guidance they provide to people when they arrive with a child in a school about which they know very little. All of that must be recognised as an incredibly valuable skill and as an asset to all of our children. School secretaries are indispensable to principals, deputy principals, and teachers who have varying responsibilities in school. School secretaries have been key to the changes that have happened in schools in recent decades, such as the mainstreaming of children with disabilities and children on the autism spectrum, whether

they are very high-functioning children or children with very big challenges, into primary and secondary schools. We have spoken about that mainstreaming on many occasions and it was the correct decision. The Minister recently recognised this key role of the secretaries in respect of schools managed by education and training boards, ETBs, whether community national schools at primary level or community colleges at second level. He has said that where such a school has more than 700 pupils, it can have two secretaries. That is a very positive move.

The fact that school secretaries do not get holiday pay and have to sign on for the summer months is really wrong. The secretaries who have to sign on welcome the fact that they can do so, but they should not have to. Their terms and conditions should include appropriate holiday pay. They should also be provided with occupational pensions. One of the school secretaries at the launch by Fórsa and the INTO, which I attended, was Maeve Hurrell, who has been a secretary in an Educate Together school for more than 30 years. People like her and Mrs. O'Doherty from Donegal, both of whom are due to retire relatively soon having given their whole working lives to children in their schools, will not have an occupational pension. The Department of Education and Skills and the Government must address this issue as a matter of urgency in next Tuesday's budget. It is likely to cost somewhere between €10 million and €30 million extra a year to immediately bring in a scheme that recognises this issue.

It is no accident that this section of the workforce, which works very hard, has gone unrecognised and has been relatively unorganised. What do those in this section of the workforce have in common? Most of them are women. It is because they are women that it has been easy to disregard and undervalue their skills and the commitment they show to the schools in which they work. I hope that the Minister will have a positive announcement to make in Tuesday's budget. I suggest that he start with €20 million or €30 million a year. In the context of the waste of money for which his Government has been responsible, this is a relatively small allocation. Given Brexit, the situation is obviously very fluid but this amount is not much in light of the extra tax that workers are paying because of the failure to index allowances and in the context of wage increases for most workers in the economy. There is now a surplus flowing into the Exchequer's coffers arising from increased income tax receipts. Justice requires that a significant portion of this surplus - not a huge amount in the overall context, but rather a relatively modest one - be allocated to the plight of the school secretaries.

The Minister must recognise the issues with regard to their working conditions, their holiday pay, and their entitlement to sick leave and an occupational pension scheme. If he does not, his Government is saying that it wants to maintain the practice of large numbers of the workforce receiving minimal pay and conditions with no ancillary benefits or rights. That is a way to impoverish people into their old age. I do not believe that is something the Minister personally wants to do. This budget is an opportunity to set the situation right. I congratulate Fórsa and I congratulate the INTO on its support for Fórsa's campaign.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Like the Minister, I welcome the opportunity for the House to discuss this issue. It is very important and I thank the Ceann Comhairle and the Business Committee for allowing us the time requested by Deputy Boyd Barrett. I have gone through the Minister's speech and I would like to raise some issues with him in that regard. The Minister says that the Department is not the employer of the staff concerned. I point out to the House that some school secretaries are employed directly by the Department. This means we have a two-tier system in employing school secretaries. Some have better pay and conditions and rights to pensions, sick pay, and the whole nine yards of workers' rights. Others have none of the above and far less pay. In one of the schools in my constituency I visited during the strike, there is a

school secretary who earns €12,000 a year less than the secretary in the adjacent school. They do the same job and have been doing it for a similar number of years. One has been doing it for slightly longer than the other. It is outrageous that there are two tiers of pay for people who do the same job. This system is archaic and must be got rid of.

The survey the Department conducted has been closed for two weeks. The Department should, with some urgency, analyse the data and produce a report on it. The Minister said in his speech that the survey was issued to schools on 10 July and that this is standard practice. Most schools are closed by then. It was very unusual to choose such a date to issue a survey to principals and vice principals and to expect them to carry out such paperwork in the middle of the holidays. Now that the Minister has the data, however, he needs to move on and analyse it very carefully.

I really take issue with the statement that the industrial action is considered unwarranted. Does the Minister really believe this is unwarranted after nearly 40 years of this two-tier system? I believe most school secretaries would say that the Minister's statement, or any indication from the Department that their action is unwarranted, is unwarranted. That statement needs to be withdrawn because it is totally unfair to the school secretaries. They have spent a lifetime working under a two-tier system. They have now taken action and are completely justified in doing so.

I have a few final things to say. The Minister said that it is standard practice in industrial relations to suspend action if it is agreed to refer a dispute to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. This is true, but it is standard practice for such a request to suspend action to come from the WRC rather than from the Minister or the Department. The Department has jumped the gun by insisting that the union withdraw the further industrial action it has planned. I believe the union has responded and said that it will not do so unless the request comes through the proper channel, the WRC, and unless the Minister gives a commitment, either publicly here today or very soon, to the union or the WRC that this issue will be addressed meaningfully, while keeping the school secretaries in mind, in order to end the two-tier system and that any new agreement will result in equality and equity. As the Minister stated, this agreement runs out in December 2019. A new agreement is needed, starting from January 2020, that will end the two-tier system of inequality. The Minister needs to address that. It is not helpful for him to urge the union to call off its planned industrial action.

These people's terms and conditions have been mentioned by many others, but it is worth going through them again. I might also throw into the mix the fact that more than 8,000 special needs assistants, SNAs, are working in even more precarious and probably worse situations than those of the secretaries. That group needs to be organised and represented properly to get its rights and stability addressed. One thing that happens, which was mentioned by other Deputies, is that during holidays this cohort of school secretaries has to sign on. Imagine the bureaucracy, paperwork, and toing and froing involved in that, without even mentioning the way in which it can mess up a person's tax over the course of the year and throw his or her PAYE affairs into disarray. It must be remembered that we are dealing with a cohort who mainly come from working-class backgrounds, who are on low pay, who are rooted in their communities and who very much rely on the few bob they get through the capitation grant. Each time they have to sign on during a holiday period, it throws all their other entitlements into disarray. They have to play catch-up all the time.

It has been mentioned that the secretaries retire without an occupational pension. On the

picket lines in Ballyfermot, the people I met were extraordinary. Teachers, parents, members of the community and special needs assistants were at the gates with the secretaries. On one picket line, I met a retired school secretary who retired after 30 odd years with no occupational pension. The woman who replaced her is facing the same future. That is really disgraceful.

When one asks the secretaries what a day in their lives is like, they say that they meet and greet parents and children in addition to dignitaries and other visitors. They look after queries from parents. When children arrive late, they bring them to their classrooms. They basically act as personal assistants to the principals and they write all the letters and do the filing. They do a lot for the Department, particularly since the introduction of the primary online data records. Every child has to have a unique number. This is about accounting for each child and preventing doubling up on the capitation grant from school to school. That is fair enough but all this work is now on top of everything else the school secretaries do. The bookwork has to be done by the 30 September. The secretaries do all the accounts for their schools. They organise wages for some of the staff. They do all the filing, order buses and check out the bills. They ring parents about children when there are problems or issues. On foot of the GDPR, there is a significant amount of paperwork, particularly when permission must be sought for children to attend football, boxing or dancing or to have their photographs taken. These multitaskers ought to be praised highly by society, by the Minister and by his Department. Praise and words alone will not be enough, however. The Minister needs to open up the negotiations in a meaningful way to end an inequitable system and make a commitment today in this regard. He should stop putting pressure on the secretaries and their union to call off their action. Rather, he should use the industrial relations machinery in the proper way such that the WRC will have a commitment from the Department that he will address this issue in an equitable way that will end the two-tier system.

I understand that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has to play a role in this. Perhaps the Minister for Education and Skills could clarify in his response whether the official in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform who deals with this is out sick. There are many officials in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Could we get over this hump and get somebody else to look after the matter without further delay? I am not saying the Minister for Education and Skills is necessarily responsible but having somebody out sick who passes the buck down the line is not an excuse for delay.

In order to move on and stop any more painful exchanges between the Minister, the Department, school secretaries and their union, it would be wonderful and really big of the Minister if he made a commitment to the school secretaries and Fórsa that he will engage with the unions in the proper manner and meaningfully to end the two-tier system and enter into an agreement, beginning on 1 January 2022, that will bring the workers' pay and conditions up to the standard they deserve.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** A byline in a newspaper article I saw was a quotation from one of the school secretaries. She said that it is as if no one cares. I disagree with that because I know from my experience of teaching and from having been the chairman of the board of management of a primary school how valuable the work of school secretaries is. I understood how valued school secretaries are by staff, students and parents. On many occasions, it is the school secretary who is the first point of contact for people who call to or telephone a school.

School secretaries, along with the other ancillary staff, have a special relationship with students. Sometimes it is the school secretary who is told something by a student that can be

brought to the attention of the relevant teachers or the principal. They are an integral part of a school and have an important role. We know, however, that there is inequality to be addressed.

As the Minister indicated, there is a need for accurate information. The Department stated that the issue will be considered when a survey has been completed and that there will be further negotiations with the union. I know it is a difficult situation because the Department is not the direct employer of some of the secretaries while it is the direct employer of others. In the school at which I was teaching, there were both types of arrangement.

Paying out of the ancillary grant depends on capitation, numbers, etc. It has been working in that the schools have been able to use the ancillary grant to pay the secretaries but it is up to the schools to decide how the grant is to be used. It has to be used for caretaking and other purposes also. Therefore, schools have a responsibility but they do not have the resources to meet the needs in respect of further pay, pension rights and sick leave. I am talking about the majority of schools but fee-paying schools, because they have extra resources, may be different.

Schools do their best within their resources in order to look after the secretaries. It was disappointing, therefore, to learn that some schools have not implemented the binding arbitration agreement of 2015. Again, accurate information is needed to address the issues. A figure was given of 3,500 school secretaries working in the education system, and it is stated that 10% are paid directly by the Department. There is a need, however, for more accuracy. We need the exact numbers, including because we are dealing with an historic set of circumstances. Before 1982, the school secretaries were employed directly by the Department of Education and Skills. Since then, the different system has come in. We can all acknowledge the changes that have taken place in the education system but the system of having different treatment or conditions for some school secretaries has been allowed to continue. There is a role for the WRC but if we have meaningful, effective dialogue between all the players, this can be resolved.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** A small minority of school secretaries and caretakers are directly employed by the Department of Education and Skills, as mentioned already, but the majority are employed by individual school boards of management on precarious low-pay contracts. They are obliged to sign on during the summer holidays and do not get sick pay or a pension. They get paid an average of €12,000 plus. They are paid through the capitation grant schemes of schools.

It is not just about pay. Much of the Minister's statement was on pay. The secretaries want to be directly employed by the State, and rightly so. They want to have a pension. They want to get paid during school holidays and to get sick pay. This has been an issue since 1978. It is not as if it has suddenly sprung up in front of the Government. The Minister stated that he met school secretaries in his area and that he knows them, knows their experiences and knows what they are doing. I commend Fórsa on taking up the issue and organising the secretaries in this sector.

Some 94% of school secretaries have voted for industrial action to demand equal pay for work of equal value. That is a maxim I always stood up for when I was a Communications Workers Union shop steward in my job in An Post. It is one I always stand by now. It is a basic principle to have equal pay for equal work of equal value.

The work-to-rule action has withdrawn school secretaries from work and public service systems and databases on the basis that, because they are not paid or recognised as public servants,

they will refuse to carry out the functions of public servants. In a letter sent to the Department on Monday, Mr. Pike, the Fórsa education organiser, advised that because there have been no discernible efforts made to resolve the underlying issues, Fórsa would shortly need to consider escalating the industrial action and to extend it to include another 150 schools where secretaries have joined the union over the past few weeks. Owing to the stance the secretaries have taken to date, more are joining the union and are willing to take a stand. I encourage every school secretary to join Fórsa in order to have their rights represented. Mr Pike went on to say, “We believe that it should not be necessary to take those measures, it is normal practice for both parties to use the services of the WRC and we see no reason why the department should refuse to participate in WRC conciliation”.

I agree with Mr. Pike and it appears that most Deputies in this Chamber agree with him too. He asked the Department for a response by close of business today. He stated that if no response is received by the deadline, or if there is a negative response, further industrial action will have to be served on schools early next week. They will move quite quickly to call industrial action in schools next week if they need to do so. According to Mr. Pike, the Department has had time to analyse the returns from its survey of school principals. That is why I have asked about the closing date. I have heard it was two weeks ago. Mr. Pike has said the Department is aware of the likelihood of possible industrial action being escalated if it refuses to co-operate with the WRC.

My final point relates to the Minister’s contention that it is standard practice in industrial relations procedures for industrial action to be suspended when it has been agreed to refer a dispute to the WRC. That is not my understanding. I understand it is more common for industrial action to be stood down when progress is made at the WRC. Disputes where low-level industrial action is ongoing are frequently referred to the WRC. It is wrong of the Minister to refer to this as a principle. He concluded his comments by urging Fórsa “to call off its industrial action to allow space for that process to take place”. School secretaries know from experience that if they and Fórsa accede to this request, they will be drawn back into a process with no conclusion in sight. They want to get this dealt with. They want to go into 2020 in the knowledge that they are direct employees of the State. That is their bottom line. I fully agree with them and fully back them on it.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I wish to share time with Deputies Michael Collins, Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy-Rae.

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

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am delighted to speak on this important issue. I support the decision of school secretaries to commence industrial action, which began with a 68% turnout on 20 September last. That does not happen lightly. These school secretaries want to be in their jobs and in their places of work. They do not want to be taking industrial action. We praised the Minister last night for the action he took to restore the status of history - stair - as a school subject. I hope he will be able to take action in this case. There is huge resistance to such action on the part of senior officials in the Department of Education and Skills. They need to be told who is the boss. The Minister is the elected accountable person here. He is in charge of the Department. Too many Ministers are allowing officialdom in the permanent government to dictate what goes on.

The secretary is often the glue that holds a school together. Secretaries act as co-ordinators

and as a kind of buffer between parents and school staff. They deal with many issues. They are on the front line of contact at all times. It can be an extremely difficult role with a significant workload. Most school secretaries like what they do and enjoy their work. As I understand it, the majority of them are represented by the trade union Fórsa. Even though Fórsa has informed us that nine out of ten secretaries perform functions that are equivalent to or exceed the work of public service workers, they have been excluded from accessing equivalent rights, such as salary scales, sick pay and pensions. That is wrong. Would the same approach be applied to senior civil servants? It most certainly would not. I am appalled to think that senior civil servants are blocking this by standing in the way of it.

It is hard to avoid Fórsa's conclusion that there is a two-tier pay system that leaves most school secretaries earning just €12,500 a year with irregular short-term contracts that force them to sign on during the summer holidays and other school breaks. We need parity of esteem here. Most importantly, we need to honour and respect the role played by school secretaries on an ongoing basis. It is time for this to be resolved. Many of these secretaries were initially employed under community employment schemes over the years. They have grown into the job, which they do with aplomb and respect for the teaching staff, the children, the students, na daltaí, and the parents and guardians. It is time they got parity of esteem. I hope the Minister will see his way to ensuring that happens.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this issue. Prior to the recent industrial action undertaken by secretaries, most of the public was unaware of the two-tier pay system that exists in this sector. Most parents of primary schoolgoing children know the school secretary as the first point of call, the first face they come into contact with when they visit the school and the messenger between them and their children. It is appalling to think that most school secretaries have to sign on during summer holidays. Some of them are forced to sign on during shorter holidays at Christmas and Easter and during mid-term breaks. This is a kick in the teeth for these hard-working, dedicated and caring people, who are the backbone of schools' organisational structures.

I want to make it clear that I fully support the decision of the Fórsa trade union to act on last month's ballot in which 94% of those who cast their votes backed industrial action. It is appalling that the Department of Education and Skills has given them no choice other than to work to rule in a manner that involves stoppages and withholding information required by the HSE for its child dental, vision and hearing screening programmes. It is unacceptable that a small number of school secretaries are employed directly by the Department, with the vast majority of them being employed directly by school boards of management under irregular low-paid contracts that do not offer entitlements such as sick pay, holiday pay and pensions. As I am a member of a school board of management in my own community of Schull, I know what work is done by the secretary there, Paula, and by others. To be quite honest, they are only getting half the pay they should be getting for the work they have put into the school. They are phenomenal workers. The schools would be in disarray without them.

The small grants that schools receive to cover secretarial expenses do not nearly enable them to offer the better terms and conditions that are deserved in return for the work that secretaries do in the running of schools. It is absolutely vital for school secretaries and caretakers to be made direct employees of the State and to be placed on secure contracts. These secretaries are efficient and professional. They work hard alongside school principals. It is a total and absolute disgrace that they earn just €12,500 a year with irregular short-term contracts that force them to sign on during the summer holidays and other school breaks. If the Minister were on

a school board of management, he would know full well how they are scraping by with their capitation grants. Boards of management in rural and urban schools have to raise funds to pay electricity and oil bills. I plead with the Minister to ensure that secretaries who are not already direct employees of the State get the pay and respect they deserve.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get this opportunity to speak about this important topic. As we know, the secretaries are out of sorts because they are not being paid properly. It is not fair because they do a tremendous job. I met the school secretary in Kilgarvan recently when I drove the school bus because my bus driver was off. I saw that her job involves ensuring that children are loaded onto and unloaded from the buses. When we took in the buses, she closed the school gate so that no child would go out past the gate. They are primarily responsible for the safety of the children. It is a fair responsibility to be entrusted with the safety of another person's child. They have to be Garda vetted, and they have to be correct in every way, because this onus of responsibility is upon them.

As other Deputies stated, school secretaries are the point of contact between parents and teachers. They are there for the enrolling of the children. They are there at every request. They are very important. They play a very important role. When we hear that some secretaries are paid directly by the State, it strikes us that it is time for all of them to be recognised. The teachers are taken up with teaching duties. There may have been a time when things were not as intense and principals had time to deal with things, but now we need a secretary in every school for the safety of children and all that goes with it. We have to be grateful for the tremendous job they do. Parents, bus drivers and teachers realise that they cannot carry on without secretaries. I support the school secretaries.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I am delighted to be able to speak in support of school secretaries. As public representatives, all of us have encountered school secretaries over the years. I will explain how I would describe it. If a school was a motor car, the school secretary would be the engine. The engine is the most important part of any machinery. The service and commitment school secretaries give are second to none. They are everything to everybody, whether the students, teachers, principals or parents, and an important conduit in the system that is a school. They go beyond the call of duty. A school secretary out for a walk in the evening could meet a parent who asks how Johnny or Mary is getting on in school. We can be sure the secretary will not rush, but will say things are going good or if there is a matter of concern or worry, he or she will tell the parents. They play a vital role. Our job is to fight for fairness, equal treatment and pay and ensure school secretaries are given proper recognition in their role in terms of having access to all of the benefits of other full-time employment. They do an important job in our communities and they should have the benefits that go with that.

I wish to put the name of a person who served as a school secretary on the record. Mary O'Neill, who is from Kenmare and lives on the Bog Road in Kilgarvan, has been a close personal friend of mine for many years. I mention her as an example of someone who is a highly respectable lady and gave years of service in Pobalscoil Inbhear Scéine. She exemplifies everything that is good about being a good person in an office in a school. As I recall, she ran the show. It is important to recognise individuals. Mary O'Neill is an example of what is good about being a school secretary, not just in our county but in this country. Every one of my colleagues here knows people like her. It is nice to acknowledge people who are good at their job and give a large part of their lives to their roles.

We are all putting our shoulder to the wheel in supporting secretaries and asking the Min-

ister to try to give these people fair pay, fair play and rights. That is all they want and that is important.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I am sharing time with Deputy Seamus Healy.

The Green Party has consistently supported the Fórsa Support our Secretaries campaign which is seeking fair treatment and equality for school secretaries. This is not a dispute which has come out of the blue. Like many other Members, this is not the first time I have raised this issue with the Minister in the Dáil and it was also discussed in detail at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills in April. This has gone on long enough. We cannot continue to stand aside and allow hard-working administrators, who are central to the functioning of our education system, to struggle under such unfair working conditions. As a former teacher, I know only too well how crucial, central and critical the role of the school secretary is on a day-to-day basis in running any school and ensuring it functions properly. They are key to everything that happens in school life. The work they do far exceeds the responsibility set out in any job description to which they sign up or in those used by the Public Appointments Service.

The problem is that we have an antiquated two-tier system of employment. We have one group made up of secretaries who are under contract with the Department of Education and Skills and enjoy the benefits and protections of public servants. For every one of these secretaries, however, we have heard horror stories involving other secretaries having to draw social welfare payments in order to make ends meet over the summer months, having no access to medical leave or being denied even the moderate pay rises to which they are entitled. A resolution to this dispute is available to the Minister.

I fully support the call by secretaries for a new system of direct employment by the Department of Education and Skills to be implemented. In an education system where teachers and principals, who rely so heavily on school secretaries, are directly paid by the Department, I see no sense in school secretaries being the exception, especially when we see the inequity this separate status can cause.

Like teachers, school secretaries do substantially similar work regardless of where they are based. They are also expected to work with departmental administrative systems regardless of whether they are employed by the Department. It makes no sense for some secretaries to be working under such unfair conditions in comparison with their colleagues. A single-tier system, provided by the Department, is needed to address this.

The price of inaction will be an entirely justified escalation of industrial action on the part of secretaries, which will ultimately impact on the functioning of our schools and learning outcomes for our students. I urge the Minister to intervene now to prevent this unnecessary disruption and secure the rights of workers who have been pushed to the margins for far too long.

Fórsa has requested that the Department utilise the services of the WRC in an effort to resolve this dispute through meaningful talks. Let those talks begin as soon as possible.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and express my support for school secretaries and the industrial action currently in progress. I do so as a lifelong trade unionist, a current associate member of Fórsa and a trade union activist in its predecessor, the IMPACT trade union, previously known as the Local Government and Public Services Union and, prior to that, the Irish Local Government Officials Union.

It is clear to me that there is huge support for school secretaries across the board, and very strong support for them in Fórsa. Their teaching colleagues in the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, INTO, and other unions involved in the education system are supportive of them. Parents' associations are also supportive of the action, as are the general public. All are now demanding that school secretaries be treated fairly and the situation be addressed urgently.

This is effectively a pay justice issue. As the Minister and everybody here knows, there is a two-tier system in respect of the employment and pay and conditions of school secretaries. Some are employed directly by the Department of Education and Skills, and are paid appropriately and have conditions appropriate to that employment, including pension entitlements. The vast majority of secretaries are employed by school boards of management. While they do their best, there is obviously a very serious difference between secretaries employed by the Department and those employed by boards of management. The latter have very irregular short-term and precarious contracts of employment. They have no entitlement to sick leave, pensions or holiday pay. They have to sign on during periods such as Christmas, Easter and the summer. Even in situations where they are forced to sign on, they will not be routinely paid social welfare payments. I have had occasion to go to the independent appeals process of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to ensure that school secretaries were paid during holiday periods. That is not good enough. In terms of pay, secretaries employed by boards of management earn €12,000 or €12,500 a year, which is considerably less than their colleagues working in the same school or a school down the road.

Secretaries are undertaking this industrial action reluctantly, but are doing so in a very committed way. The vote for industrial action is an indication of that, given that 94% voted in favour, which is an almost unprecedented figure. It is an indication that school secretaries are adamant that their pay and conditions be addressed during this round of industrial action through whatever negotiations take place. It is important to point out that this issue has been ongoing for almost four decades. I was an activist in the union for 30 years and have been a Member of this House for the past 15 years. This issue has been raised on a regular basis for at least the past 30 years. It is time for the situation finally to be sorted out such that all school secretaries are employed directly by the Department and have appropriate pay and the conditions of employment which attach to departmental employees.

School secretaries are an indispensable part of the school scene. They are the hub of the school and undertake a range of important duties. There would be serious consequences for schools and school communities if those duties were not fulfilled.

Statistics and costings relating to this issue were presented to the committee in April. Studies were carried out in 2010, 2014 and 2018. We have studies and statistics on the issue coming out of our ears. It is time for action. It is time for the secretaries to be fairly and reasonably dealt with and for them to receive the same pay, conditions and status as their colleagues who are employed directly by the Department. I urge the Minister to intervene immediately to ensure that the secretaries become departmental employees.

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Canney):** I listened to the earlier contributions while in my office. As a rural Deputy who lives in an area with a significant number of national schools which very much rely on their school secretaries, I know that school secretaries are embedded in their community. It is important that we acknowledge that. It has been recognised by all Members who have spoken thus far. Deputy Healy referred to this being a legacy issue which goes back 40 years. It is

important to recognise what school secretaries do within communities. It is not just a job; it is being part of the community, the school and the educational facilities of an area. Many secretaries are embedded in the school because they attended the school or their children or other family members do so. It is important that we recognise the work they do because schools and principals cannot function without a school secretary.

I spent the past two hours with departmental officials and representatives of the Minister's office, working on trying to progress this issue. I left the meeting to speak on it in the Chamber. It is important that we communicate with one another and ensure that we try to resolve this situation. The Minister may update us further in his closing address.

I acknowledge the work done by Fórsa in highlighting the issue and ensuring it is brought to this stage. On my behalf and that of the Government and the Department of Education and Skills, I wish to state that school secretaries are a very important part of society. We need to ensure that everything is resolved in the best manner possible.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** Will the matter go to the Workplace Relations Commission?

**Deputy Declan Breathnach:** I am happy to speak on the subject and to support school secretaries, as have other Deputies. Schools were delighted when they first received ancillary grants to employ secretaries and caretakers, but it has become an outmoded system which needs to be rejigged to ensure that staff, particularly secretarial staff, get full-time employment and are recognised in the system.

Deputy Healy referred to the number of studies that have been carried out. I contend that if time-in-work and value-for-money studies were carried out to assess the amount of time recovered by secretaries which allows teachers to get on with teaching, the Minister would certainly give full status, pay, working conditions and recognition to school secretaries. It would be a cost-neutral exercise.

I will not go over ground that has been addressed. Other speakers referred to secretaries being the engine room, heartbeat or glue of schools and critical to their success. I consider them to be the cornerstone of a school's success. All school principals, particularly those of small primary schools would, as the Minister alluded, agree that the successful running of a school is based on the principal having the full co-operation of and sharing responsibility with them. More importantly, it is based on the cornerstone which is the school secretary. The work the secretaries do needs to be recognised. They should be given full and unequivocal support by the House. I hope that the Minister can find a formula to so do.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I congratulate the Minister on his decision to reinstate history as a core subject for the junior cycle. Teachers, parents and, eventually, students will thank him very much for that in light of its importance in the school curriculum. It is a very positive decision.

The school secretary is the first person one meets when one goes through the doors or gates of a school. They are expected to deal with so much, including upset pupils, emotional parents and stressed teachers. As my colleague, Deputy Breathnach, stated, they are the glue that keeps the school community together. They are the backbone of schools throughout the country and it is most unfair that not all school secretaries and caretakers come under the umbrella of the Department of Education and Skills and that some are expected to work alongside colleagues who are on a different payscale and may be paid vastly more for doing the same work. I congratulate the staff, parents, students and special needs assistants who supported and stood shoulder to

shoulder with secretaries across the country.

It dawned on me during a meeting with secretaries held in The Vale national school outside Bailieborough that this workforce is predominantly female. The secretaries of St. Anne's national school, Bailieborough, Ballinamoney national school, Tunnyduff national school, Shercock national school and Crossreagh national school were present. While we had coffee that morning, I asked them whether there are many males in the workforce. They had to think about it. Women fill the vast majority of school secretary posts. Is there any other workforce in which women are not paid for holidays, sick leave or maternity leave and do not have pension entitlements? Not in this day and age.

Ms Marie Brady, the secretary of St. Felim's national school, is leading the way in fighting for the cause of secretaries. She pointed out that the secretaries fighting for the cause will probably not gain very much from any improvements made by the Minister. Rather, they are fighting for the next generation of secretaries. They are to be commended on that.

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** I will not repeat what has been said but it is important to realise secretaries are the cornerstone of the smooth running of any school. The Minister, like Deputy Catherine Martin, is a former múinteoir scoile, and he will know that better than most. Any of us who have taken our children to school, particularly one attended by a few hundred students, be it a secondary or a national school, will know how much work those secretaries have to do. It is essential this issue be dealt with. I hope the Minister will take it by the scruff of the neck and sort it out as quickly as possible.

Like Deputy Smyth, I welcome the Minister's decision on history but he now needs to deal with the issue concerning secretaries and realise their role and function are vital. These secretaries cannot be treated differently from other school secretaries. When we consider only 10% of school secretaries come under the Department, that shows there is a huge cohort of people who need to be treated properly and respectfully. Things change, and they have to do so. This is a wealthy country in many respects. People often say we cannot afford this but I am sure the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, would agree education is the cornerstone of our society. We must ensure all these situations are rectified to ensure there are no shortcomings regarding our schools. As has been said, this issue is not the fault of the schools. The Department needs to pony up and sort this out as soon as possible. The Minister can see that Fórsa wants to engage and to sort this out.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I welcome the debate. It is obvious from all the contributions by Members of all parties and none that there is universal acceptance that something needs to be done. There is goodwill on this issue across the House and it is the Minister's job to translate that goodwill into action.

I heard the Minister respond to this issue during Questions on Promised Legislation earlier in the week. He said there have been many Ministers with responsibility for education who have not dealt with this issue and that it has been an issue for a long number of years. That is not an excuse for not doing anything; it is all the more reason something should be done.

This is not an anomaly that just needs to be fixed. This is an inherent unfairness where school secretaries are doing exactly the same job under different conditions, different levels of pay and not having the protection of being directly employed by the State which carries with it sick pay, holiday pay and a pension benefit. It is difficult for boards of management that know

their secretaries are being treated differently from others. It is an unfairness that can be fixed and something that can be addressed. I am not saying it is a simple fix but there are obvious things that can be done. It is in the gift of the Minister's Department, not in the gift of the rest of us who have made our points. We could all try to score points off each other in terms of who was in government in the past. The reality is the Minister, Deputy McHugh, is in government now. He is the Minister, he can fix this and he has the goodwill of this House to do so. I urge him to fix this as quickly as possible.

I, too, met school secretaries on the picket lines. A very good public meeting on this issue, organised by the Fórsa trade union, took place in Waterford about three months ago. I went along and listened to school secretaries tell their stories. Many of the school secretaries in the room were not affected by this issue and enjoyed better working conditions but they were there in support of and to show solidarity for those who did not enjoy those conditions. If they are prepared to show their solidarity, and many of them came out on the picket lines in support of their colleagues, we have to do our job in this Chamber. The school secretaries have raised the issue, as has the trade union. They have raised concerns that the Department has not really been engaging with them on this issue, as the Minister will know. They want real engagement. We all know the only way this will be resolved is by the trade union and the Department sitting down together with a clear intention of addressing it. I encourage the Minister to do that. I hope all the contributions made here will play their part in making sure we can resolve this issue to the benefit of those school secretaries across the State.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** I want to update the House. Following discussion with Fórsa late this evening, I can say the following. The Department acknowledges that Fórsa lodged a claim in respect of school secretaries and caretakers following on from a 2015 arbitration finding which expires at the end of 2019. The Department regrets that the union is now engaging in industrial action. As is normal practice, the Department will agree to use the industrial relations machinery of the State to resolve this matter. Therefore, in order to address the various issues within the claim and to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution, the Department will participate in discussions with Fórsa under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. I take on board Deputy Smith's point as to from where the instructions will come. The Department will request, and I will personally request, the assistance of the WRC in ensuring that once talks commence the industrial action be stood down to enable these discussions to progress. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on potential outcomes of the WRC process at this stage. I hope a mutually acceptable solution can be found.

I acknowledge all the contributions made this evening. The previous speaker summed it up in terms of the goodwill right across the House to try to make something happen here. We are on the same page in identifying this as an anomaly. I raised this issue when my party was in opposition. I also raised it on this side of the House, most recently last October when I got the job as Minister for Education and Skills and said that I wanted to do something about it. There is a good energy around this now. There is the space to allow the Department to finish the work on the survey.

I thank my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and other people, through the Members' communication networks, for keeping the communication lines open to ensure this is going to happen.

On a personal level, I mention Kathleen O'Doherty from Donegal who, on behalf of all

the secretaries and of the many secretaries who have campaigned on this issue for many years, worked to help to bring it to this stage. I thank the Deputies again for their contributions this evening. Undoubtedly, those contributions will help and be of value in creating awareness of the issue as these discussions take place. I wish the process well. I thank my officials who have been engaging on this issue with Fórsa. I also thank the Fórsa union for coming to this agreement this evening.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have been asked if it is possible for the Minister to provide a note of what has been agreed; in other words, the statement he has just announced.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Can the spokespersons reply briefly to what the Minister said? He has just made a major announcement.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** He has made a major announcement. The spokespersons can have one minute.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The Minister has granted exactly what Fianna Fáil had asked for and exactly what Fórsa had asked for during the past few weeks, namely, that talks would start. This is a major announcement and we welcome it. It is the start of a process but it is what the WRC asked for almost five years ago. The secretaries have had to take industrial action and I commend them on the action they have taken so far to get to this point. However, as is usual with this Government, and as I said during my contribution an hour ago, it always seems to let things fester before it eventually agrees to talks, and now it has happened during this Dáil debate this evening. It is a pity it did not happen before that but I acknowledge it is a step forward. It is what we have asked for. I just do not know why the Government had to put everybody through so much hassle to get to this point.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The first thing we should do is not play party politics with this issue and start patting ourselves on the back. It is the secretaries and caretakers who have been pushing this issue for years. Admittedly, we have been a conduit and the trade union in recent times has robustly taken on this issue but this is only the start of a process. There is a long way to go. I wish all the sides well. I want to see a resolution and I hope that we can get one. I still think it is in the gift of the Department to sort it out, notwithstanding that a process has opened up, and that is encouraging. I hope the outcome of that will be the deal and the better working conditions that those school secretaries and caretakers deserve.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I welcome what the Minister said. It is a step forward and, hopefully, will be an end to the kick-the-can-down-the-road approach which the Department has taken so far. It is important that Fórsa and the school secretaries get a signal from the Minister and his Department that they want to end the two-tier system and have an equitable deal starting on 1 January 2020. It is not my role to pre-empt any industrial relations discussions. However, now that the Minister is going to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, that is what he will have to go with. Given that there are hundreds of school secretaries watching this debate, it is a shame that the Minister could not state now that he wants to see an end to the two-tier system for the employment of secretaries and an equitable deal. He said something, however, that is positive which we welcome. We look forward to fruitful negotiations with the WRC which will end the discrimination that these women - they are mainly women - have suffered for two generations.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I welcome the Minister's response. It is a pity that it went to the

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wire, however. The Fórsa union, representing the secretaries, made it clear today that if the Department was not willing to go to the WRC, its members would take industrial action next week. On the last point of calling off industrial action for the talks to take place, I was informed by the secretaries that they knew they could not concede on that because of their experience of the past 40 years trying to get this issue into the ether of politics.

I welcome this move and I hope the secretaries achieve the direct employment for which they are looking. I hope they also get all the holiday pay and pension rights that go with it. I look forward to these negotiations.

**Deputy Catherine Martin:** I welcome this decision he will enter talks. I hope they will be meaningful. It is a shame that it took industrial action to prompt this response. The issue of equal pay for equal work for our secretaries, caretakers and teachers in the full education system needs to be tackled. We must start with the secretaries and move on to the teachers for equal pay for equal work. There must be meaningful talks and an end to the two-tier system of pay.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I welcome the decision to go to the WRC. This is not unusual, however, and is just the first step. The important point is that the Minister and his officials go to the WRC with a view to solving this problem in a way that will mean school secretaries will be employed directly by the Department of Education and Skills. That is the bottom line and what the process must achieve.

### UN Climate Action Summit: Statements

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I am glad to have the opportunity to discuss what transacted at the UN assembly on climate action. It was a useful meeting. A significant innovation by the UN was to have a whole day devoted to young people presenting both their concerns about and solutions to the climate challenge. It provided a useful environment. As one can imagine, there were significant demands for a big step-up in ambitions from governments which was understandable. There was significant commitment to practical action at both community level and various innovation initiatives.

The lesson for us is that we need to develop a more systematic engagement with young people in the decision-making surrounding the climate action plan. I intend to act on that by bringing in better procedures where young people can be directly involved and give feedback. The action plan we put together is designed to be refreshed each year. It is important we engage communities widely, particularly young people who, rightly, are pointing out our generation as the first one which will pass on the environment in a worse condition than we found it. We have a significant responsibility to respond to this.

The second element was a full day of a climate summit organised by the UN Secretary General. The Taoiseach, on behalf of Ireland, presented our climate action plan. It was the first time to present our approach to deliver a stepped-up ambition from Ireland. There was considerable interest among other countries at the model which we have such as the Citizens Assembly, the all-party Oireachtas committee and foundation these provided for the plan. There was also interest in our efforts to change with carbon budgets, stronger accountability and driving reform

from the Taoiseach's Department. These elements of the plan won considerable interest.

The Taoiseach also announced two new policy elements. The all-party Oireachtas committee proposed and the Government accepted that carbon prices should move systematically to €80 per tonne by the end of the decade. The Taoiseach committed that those funds would be used exclusively for climate actions. He specifically referenced the need to make sure we do not leave some sections of our society behind in the context of fuel poverty, the so-called just transition. He also stated the need to empower families, farms, enterprises and the wider community to take on the changes that need to be made. These are significant commitments.

In other countries, there have been challenges to the idea of carbon pricing. John FitzGerald, the chairman of the climate action advisory committee, has been an economic adviser for many years. It is striking that the evidence he has adduced is that it is impossible to envisage a path to deliver the climate action we need without including carbon pricing as part of that. It is in that context that there was broad-based support for that within the Oireachtas committee. Reflecting on the views that were expressed at the Oireachtas committee, there will be widespread support for, as the tax specialists would say, hypothecating the revenue from carbon pricing for that purpose.

The second significant announcement the Taoiseach made was on foot of the advice that he and I sought from the Climate Change Advisory Council on the correct policy regarding exploration for oil and gas in the context of a transition to a low-carbon economy. The Climate Change Advisory Council advised that the approach we should take is to cease future exploration for oil but continue to explore for gas. That approach has been endorsed by Government and I am now working on the detailed memorandum to give effect to it. There has been considerable debate in this House about this. I have always taken the view that we need to examine the evidence rather than make a decision without assessing it. The reasons we are continuing to explore for gas, as the council advised, are twofold. First, the use of gas reserves would, unlike the use of coal or oil reserves, not put us out beyond the climate ambition of net zero emissions by 2050. The council also made the strong point that if one wants to have a successful transition to introduce renewable energy onto one's electricity grid, one needs stand-by power and that at the current state of technological development, the only available stand-by power that could allow us advance from the present 30% renewables to 70% by 2030 is to have gas providing much of that stand-by power for when the wind does not blow or the sun does not shine. It is important that as we move away from coal and peat, we recognise that to do so successfully in a way that allows us to be safe and secure in the delivery of power to consumers requires us to continue to have access to gas. When Corrib is complete - its resources could be exhausted by the middle of the 2020s - we would be entirely dependent on imported gas and an additional find of gas would be significant and helpful in allowing us to make the transition.

The conference also provided a number of areas in respect of which commitments could be made. There were nine different areas identified by the UN Secretary General. These included, for example, youth and public involvement. That was one area where we, along with the Marshall Islands, developed a specific mandate we asked people to sign up for. Well over 40 people signed up to a mandate that would involve much more open participation by communities, and particularly engagement with younger people, in implementing the climate action plan.

There also were valuable reflections on what can be done within the industrial sector and the renewables sector, and what can be done with climate funds to address the needs of particular countries, many of which, such as the island nations with which Ireland has a particular affinity,

were represented. In many ways, those nations are facing not the future implications but rather the immediate and current implications of global warming. Some governments are having to decide which islands they will abandon and how they will move their people in order to keep them safe in the coming decade. It is a real live issue for them.

Many nations, including Ireland, are signing up to much higher ambitions in the context of the UN Paris Agreement. These will be brought forward next year at the next major session run by the UN on climate. There was a general feeling that we need to dramatically step up funding. Many countries, particularly those in Europe, committed to a doubling of the funding to assist other countries in adapting to the challenges that they are facing. There was considerable interest also in those nations developing themselves renewable power because many of them are dependent on fossil fuels and feel that they are at the end of the supply line and particularly exposed.

The UN conference endorsed my belief that the window of opportunity is closing rapidly. Ireland needs to respond by implementing the plan we have put in place, and, hopefully, by going even further. The elements in that plan are already challenging. We want five times the amount of renewable power. By 2030, we will want 25 times the proportion of drivers buying electric vehicles. We will want ten times the amount of retrofitting going on by 2030. These are ambitious targets and I am determined that we will deliver them.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Dooley has ten minutes.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I want to share two minutes of that with Deputy Lisa Chambers.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The Minister's plan is ambitious. It is good on detail relating to why we should implement it and what we should do, but it is glaringly light on how we should do it. Unfortunately, no big statements in the hallowed halls of the UN will move that position. It is important that we have the opportunity to concentrate on some of the commitments that the Government made at the UN summit. Even though they are both intertwined, we can deal with the plan at a later stage. In particular, it is right that we would scrutinise the Taoiseach's statements here since he seems to be much more ambitious when he spends a number of hours travelling to the United States. Whether it is jet lag or whatever, when it comes to discussing climate change, the Taoiseach seems to be more giving of his time and consideration when he is abroad than is the case when he is in this House.

This is particularly important from a climate justice perspective. In a joint article published just before the UN event, Trócaire, Concern, Oxfam and Goal noted that extreme weather due to climate change is affecting millions of people. This is something that Ireland will witness, with Hurricane Lorenzo due to hit tomorrow. For those of us who are talking to people on the ground, as the Minister is, they are starting to understand the implications of climate change. The organisations to which I refer highlighted that "The cruellest injustice of climate change is that it impacts first and hardest on the world's poorest and most vulnerable". They also stated that the summit would be an opportunity to showcase our tangible commitments in light of Ireland's campaign for a seat on the Security Council.

In his UN speech, the Taoiseach listed climate measures and stated that the Government is "responding ... with creativity, with imagination and with courage." I want to address his list and strongly reject any claim of creativity, imagination or, indeed, courage. First, we have not

had sight of the necessary climate legislation that the Taoiseach referred to. The Taoiseach also highlighted fossil fuel divestment but we know that his party did not produce the relevant legislation. The Taoiseach noted the commitment to increase renewable electricity to 70% but did not mention anything about the planning obstacles for solar panels on roofs or ensuring community energy and community ownership of renewables, all of which are significant gaps that must be overcome to support climate action at local level. Unlike the leaders of other EU member states, the Taoiseach made no commitment to increase funding to the UN Green Climate Fund or to support a higher EU 2030 target. The Minister hinted at that earlier and indicated that while we are ambitious, we probably need to be more ambitious. That is the kind of stuff that we would have liked to have heard from the Taoiseach at the UN convention. I do not believe the Government has showed creativity, imagination or courage. We have yet to see the “tangible commitments” that were called for. I do not believe the Government has responded to the recent children’s protest.

The real problem has been that the Government knowingly neglected Ireland’s climate responsibilities for the best part of the past decade. It is far from clear that Ministers are leading a co-ordinated response that will ensure that Ireland meets its commitments and avoids significant EU fines.

The Comptroller and Auditor General stated in recent days that Ireland’s poor performance is already projected to cost up to €125 million in fines and that costs will escalate if the Government does not radically improve its approach. The Government must commit, before the election, to enacting the necessary legislation to introduce a net zero target and improve accountability across Government. I know of the Minister’s personal commitment but I certainly would question the commitment of other Ministers and, indeed, of the Cabinet in its entirety.

The Taoiseach’s announcement that there will be a phasing out of oil exploration initially appeared to be a step in the right direction. Although the announcement made for a good headline and got plenty of traction for a day or so, it looks less impressive when the details are examined. Unlike gas, Ireland does not have an indigenous oil industry and there have been no viable oil finds whatsoever. Making an announcement to ban something that is not there is like a child at Lent promising to give up the sweets he or she never had in the first place. The Taoiseach’s comments to the media implied a complete ban on oil exploration but he later referred to a moratorium applying to 80% of Irish waters. The Department also produced a guide on exploration just weeks before. The Government must urgently clarify what steps will be taken to implement this moratorium. The Government should also have clarified an appropriate sunset period for the phase-out of oil and gas exploration, much like it did for the selling of petrol and diesel cars.

The Taoiseach also stated that he made his announcement following advice from the Climate Change Advisory Council. He failed to refer to the briefing from the council which accompanied that letter. The council provided further explanation in this briefing and noted that there are risks to achieving Ireland’s 2030 and 2050 targets if large reserves of oil and gas are brought ashore and, in addition, that there are risks to the economy of stranded assets and lock-in to fossil fuel based energy systems. There is significant background information that very much qualifies the letter provided from the Climate Change Advisory Council. I have not seen that referred to by the Minister or the Taoiseach. The council also stated that a switch to renewables may be more cost-effective and that better interconnection may improve security of supply at less cost than offshore fossil fuels. I note the announcement today on the Celtic interconnector. Can the Minister confirm that this briefing was examined prior to the Taoiseach’s

comments and could he also outline the process around how the council came to write the letter in the first instance?

The Taoiseach also stated that he listened to the Citizens' Assembly and sought consensus through the Joint Committee on Climate Action, yet the Government is not respecting this consensus. It is failing to live up to deadlines in the committee's report. Indeed, they were not even included in the Government's new climate plan, despite Fine Gael committing to them in March at the committee.

On carbon tax, I welcome that the Taoiseach committed to support Fianna Fáil's position on ring-fencing carbon tax revenues both to pay for climate measures and to ensure that vulnerable households are protected. Fianna Fáil has been clear that it would be unacceptable to bring in a carbon tax increase without ensuring that the vulnerable are better protected from fuel poverty. Revenues should also be used to support behavioural change and directed towards helping citizens. I refer here to grants and incentives for retrofits, rooftop solar on farm buildings and initiatives to ensure a just transition.

In respect of a just transition, Fianna Fáil is also extremely concerned by developments at the peat stations in the midlands and at the Moneypoint coal plant, where the Government seems to be willing to let jobs be lost rather than engage with workers before the losses occur. These businesses have been central to rural communities for generations. Fianna Fáil has repeatedly stated that we need a just transition for all workers and communities. There is an urgent need to put in place supports that would lead to workers being retrained, communities assisted and peatlands restored to assist in carbon sequestration. This issue was a key focus of the Oireachtas committee which noted the need for a social dialogue through the creation of an independent just transition task force. Fine Gael committed to establishing this task force at the committee but unfortunately it did not form part of the Government's climate plan. Representatives were not even part of the regional forums set up to deal with the issue.

On air quality, it is important that we prioritise actions that will reduce emissions and enhance quality of life, particularly for our children. I am extremely concerned about levels of air pollution which are resulting in over 1,000 deaths in Ireland each year. The Government has failed to introduce a nationwide ban on smoky coal. We still have no sight of the national clean air strategy. Will the Minister clarify the steps he is taking to ban smoky coal so that we can see air quality improvements this year?

There is a knowing mismatch between the Taoiseach's UN statements and the action being taken domestically. There are real environmental, health and economic costs as a result of the Government's lack of leadership and ambition. We must treat the climate challenge as a cross-societal opportunity where action will improve the quality of our lives. All levels of society must be assisted both to shift their behaviour away from fossil fuels and to protect biodiversity in our communities.

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** Climate change is a global crisis and it is the challenge of our time. It is young people who are leading the way in forcing the changes that are necessary. They have shown immense leadership in respect of this issue. The past two decades have been the hottest in the past 400 years. Sea levels are rising and the Earth's temperature is increasing at an alarming rate. The Arctic ice is melting and it is predicted that by 2040 the region will expect to have its first completely ice-free summer. Coral reefs are dying. There are extreme weather events, storms, heatwaves and forest fires. In the context of our own country, Storm

Lorenzo is on the way. This storm is a previously unprecedented event and it is the second of its kind in the past couple of years. Species are becoming extinct at an alarming rate and entire ecosystems are dying. We know that we need to act now, while there is still time left to do something about this. Difficult decisions will have to be made. They will be unpalatable. They will be a challenge and they will require all of us to make those changes together. They will require the State to pay and each and every one of us to put our hands in our pockets to pay also. That does pose a difficulty for Government in making those changes but that is the responsibility that comes with being in a leadership role. We must look at issues like the carbon tax and the challenges of increasing it, always bearing in mind those who are vulnerable to fuel poverty and protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

There is great pressure on farming as well, which must also be handled in a just and fair way. I dispute the policy at EU level whereby we seek to import food from other countries and reduce food production within the Union. That policy needs to be looked at. The EU must be prepared to pay to have good quality, sustainable food produced within member states. We also have to help people to transition to alternatives. I do not need to tell the Minister that the electric vehicles he mentioned are unaffordable to most people, as are solar panels. If the State is going to meet its 2030 obligations, having failed miserably to meet its 2020 targets, it will have to assist people financially in changing to alternatives. The challenge is now for the Oireachtas to act as a whole but also for Government to lead on this, help us meet our targets and help people address the climate challenge.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I am sharing time with Deputy Martin Kenny. I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. It is telling that approximately 30 seconds into his contribution, the Minister mentioned carbon taxes and carbon pricing. It is regrettable that, from the Government's perspective and from that of others in political circles, the whole debate on climate action is framed around carbon tax increases as if they constitute a panacea. There is not agreement in this House on increasing carbon taxes but there is agreement from all of the experts - the Minister mentioned one - that carbon taxes are regressive. That was restated by the Department of Finance, the ESRI and even the Minister for Finance. If carbon taxation is regressive that is the first problem, but the bigger problem is that it does not work in the sense that it does not change people's behaviour unless alternatives are in place. Before the Minister comes back and states that Sinn Féin and others are against levies or taxes that are progressive and change people's behaviour, we supported the sugar tax and in fact called for it over many years, and we supported the plastic bag levy. We did so because such measures work. People have obvious alternatives that they can use. Carbon tax increases will raise revenue but the vast majority of people cannot buy one of the 1 million electric cars that the Government says will be on the roads over the next ten years - this target will be impossible to achieve - or pay for deep retrofits of their homes in the way those with deep pockets can. It is not going to be something that they can mitigate, which means all we are doing is increasing their cost of living and not dealing with the problems at all.

There are solutions of course. If we are really serious about climate action, it would be much more effective to begin with the alternatives. The starting point should be public transport. There are a lot of parts of the country that do not have proper public transport. There needs to be joined-up thinking in terms of the national planning framework. I support many elements of Project Ireland 2040, the national planning strategy which looks at regional cities, namely, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. I do not see any evidence of joined-up thinking in the context of having integrated transport hubs or strategies for those cities and looking

ahead to 20 years from now when the population targets that are set have been achieved and then having the proper transport systems in place. I do not see the investment in public transport that is necessary and that needs to happen in order to facilitate this.

I also do not see the type of retrofitting programmes, such as those which are needed for older people and which would be the best way to start, that are required. Deputy Dooley referred to community-led renewable energy farms such as, for example, wind farms. We had representatives from one wind farm before the Joint Committee on Climate Action earlier. It is the only one of its kind in the country. That is the case because the Government has not learned the lesson of how difficult it is for community-led wind farms to get up and running in the first instance, to operate and to add the value that they should. All the barriers that community-led wind farms faced almost 20 years ago are still there for those who are considering this option today. While we have made advances in wind energy, we certainly have not done so in terms of making it easier for community-led projects to work.

There are lots of alternatives that can and should be put in place. That is where the focus of the debate should be. We can have our differences on carbon tax increases. If I believed that they would change people's behaviour and reduce carbon emissions, I would support them, as I supported the sugar tax and the plastic bag levy. However, I do not think they will do that. They constitute window-dressing and pretence, and that does not do justice to the climate action debate we should be having.

It is incredible that the Government is pushing ahead with the importation of fracked gas, even though fracking is banned here. We will be debating this issue tomorrow. What is happening is extraordinary, particularly in view of the fact that fracking is banned here as a result of the obvious enormous environmental and social damage it inflicts. Sinn Féin has consistently opposed fracking at every level. However, we now have a situation where the Government is pushing ahead with the liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal at Shannon. This project is going ahead despite much concern and opposition. Even before there has been a proper debate in the Dáil, we have a high-level committee in Brussels meeting on Friday that could make decisions on this. Again, this is hypocrisy. That is the problem with this Government's approach to climate action. We saw it with the Mercosur trade deal and we see it again here. We see it across the board. Deputy Dooley touched on the problem. The Government's plan is high on rhetoric but when one actually starts looking at the detail, much of it consists of targets that cannot be met. The Minister will be aware that the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport wrote to his Department and stated that the objective of putting 1 million electric cars on our roads cannot be met. The Minister's deep retrofit plan, which was rolled out for people with deep pockets, fell apart and he had to patch it back together again. Even the limited things the Minister is trying to do have not worked. I want to work with the Government, as does my party, to ensure that we put solutions in place. However, those solutions must be real, practical and tangible, and they have to work. If they do not work, and if they are just window-dressing, we will not support them.

**Deputy Gerry Adams:** Two weeks ago, Courthouse Square in Dundalk was filled with the loud chants of young people as they spoke out against climate change and for climate justice. They, and the millions more who took part in a global day of action, have demonstrated an energy and commitment that is inspirational. A few days later, speaking in New York at the UN climate change summit, Greta Thunberg berated the political leaders of the world for not honouring past agreements on climate change. She accused governments of failing humanity and warned of "the beginning of a mass extinction". The Swedish climate activist said: "We

will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line". That is what the Minister has to do as well.

The science advisory group to the summit produced a report, *United in Science*, that brings together the most recent data from the world's six leading environmental organisations. The report found that current plans to meet the 2015 Paris Agreement are insufficient. Last October, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that we have only 12 years to limit climate change. If we fail, the people of the world, particularly hundreds of millions in under-developed countries, will face extreme droughts, heat, floods, increased food and water supply insecurity, and poverty. It also means that Belfast, Dublin, Dundalk and other coastal towns and cities will face significant and serious flood dangers.

Without resolute action, millions are at risk. The future of our children and grandchildren depends on the decisions we take now. Moreover, any strategies to tackle climate change must be rooted in the principles of social justice and equality. Governments, including the Irish Government, and the EU need to significantly step up their climate change commitments and challenge the big polluters.

In his speech to the UN, the Taoiseach announced that oil exploration will end. He also announced that gas exploration will continue. Five months ago, the Government granted consent to a subsidiary of the Chinese National Offshore Oil Company for an exploratory oil and gas well in the Porcupine Basin. This new licence allows for drilling in an area where that company and ExxonMobil already hold licences to explore for oil and gas until 2033. Will the Government introduce a moratorium on any further, new exploration for fossil fuels in Ireland? Will it remove its opposition to the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill 2018?

An Taoiseach's plamás at the UN to the effect that he wants Ireland to be known as a green country is worthless rhetoric when set against the Government's policies on environmental issues. His own climate action plan lacks ambition and it does not address the substantive issues of pollution, over-consumption, corporate responsibility and opposition to fracking. The reality is that this State will spectacularly fail to meet its 20% reduction target by 2020.

Sinn Féin's approach is clear. We want to see 80% of our energy produced by renewables by 2030. This has to be done in a way that protects lower income families and ensures that ordinary people do not carry an unjust share of the burden. In the past two weeks, young people in cities across the world have shown the way forward. Their example should guide us in the time ahead.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** I call Deputy Sean Sherlock, who is sharing time with the Deputy Alan Kelly.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I want to deal with the issue of financing. If we are to have climate action, there is the climate action fund. The Minister has stated previously that it is the intention of the Government to use the reserves from the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, and that if there is any surplus within that reserve, it would be used for the purposes of the actions contained within the climate action plan. Is it the case that the reserves can be used now or does it require a change of legislation? I understand the Minister may have made a statement in this regard previously but I do not have access to that. It would be useful to understand from the Minister what his intention is regarding the use of NORA. If we are to talk about creating a

fund and utilising NORA, it would be useful to know the legal position. My understanding, and I stand open to correction, is that if it is intended to repurpose the NORA surplus reserves in any way at this point, that could be deemed to be unlawful. It would be useful to have a clarification from the Minister on that.

The second issue is one in respect of which we have received many emails in the past 24 hours, namely, the LNG terminal. The Minister will be aware that among the concerns raised in regard to the proposal to designate the construction of a liquefied natural gas terminal as an EU project of common interest is the prospect of fracked gas being imported from the United States. No doubt the scheduled hearings before the joint committee will provide an opportunity to consider the controversial aspects of the fracking process and whether gas extracted in this way should be introduced into the Irish and European energy mix. I would like the Minister to outline the position in law as regards such a facility. As I understand it, the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Prohibition of Onshore Hydraulic Fracking) Act 2017 introduced the fracking ban by inserting into the principle Act - that is, the 1960 Act - a new Chapter IIA dealing with hydraulic fracturing. The core provision of the new section 5B, under Chapter IIA, provided, "It shall not be lawful for a person to search for, get, raise, take, carry away or work petroleum by means of hydraulic fracturing." We find the relevant definitions in section 2(1) of the 1960 Act. That section includes the following definition: "Working" when used in relation to petroleum, includes digging, searching for, boring for, getting, raising, taking, carrying away, storing ["storing" being the key word] and treating petroleum, and cognate words shall be construed accordingly." It seems, therefore, that to "work" petroleum encompasses its storage and that, according to at least one interpretation of section 5B, it is unlawful not only to search for or extract natural gas by fracking but also to store fracked gas in the State. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm to me whether it is his view that, without a change in the law, an LPG terminal could be used for the storage of imported gas that has been extracted by way of hydraulic fracturing elsewhere in the world.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I thank my colleague, Deputy Sherlock, for sharing time. As someone who previously held the Minister's portfolio as well as a number of others - it was three ministries in one according to this Government - and who brought in the legislation on climate change and participated in the adoption of the COP21 agreement in December 2015 and signed it in the UN a few months later, I wish to raise a few issues that are of importance to me. They are, even though some of them relate to my county, of national interest.

The first relates to the Silvermines hydroelectric plant, of which the Minister is well aware. It is a very important project and has huge significance for our future energy requirements. We have pushed for the project for a number of years and the Government is supportive of it. The project just needs to fit within the Government's policies. We already have European Union designation for it and the support of the Tánaiste and so many other people across the Government. It was disappointing, however, not to see it up in lights as regards Government strategy. I hope it will be repositioned because it must be there as part of the mix of future energy requirements. Given the extent to which we will be dependent on wind energy in the future, such a project, which will recycle wind energy through the use of a pumped storage system on the site of a disused mine, is incredibly important. Given the amount of power it will provide to us, the Minister will really have to refocus his efforts on it, and I implore him to do so. This €650 million project can be funded predominantly from outside the State as long as the State is willing to support it. The Minister needs to prioritise this.

The second matter to which I wish to refer relates to what has been described as "the IFSC

of the bioeconomy”, namely, Lisheen mine. I am on the board of this project and have been on the project team for six years or so. It was a great day when the bioeconomy status of Lisheen was confirmed, and a significant level of investment is going into the project. We need the Minister’s help with one or two issues. The big one is to get a gas pipeline connection to the site. This would dramatically change the capacity to bring even more industries onto the site. We already have Glanbia and a number of others. I ask the Minister to consider this.

I also implore the Minister to look at the issue of community wind farms. He has committed to putting the community pot in the renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, auction. Templederry wind farm, which is located close to where I live, is probably the only community-led wind farm in the country. We can understand why there are not more of them, given the length of time it has taken the community to be able to sell the wind farm’s electricity onto the grid. I therefore ask the Minister to allow for a provision within the pot, the matrix, to enable such wind farms to contribute. The amount of revenue they will contribute to their local economies is way above what mass-scale wind farms would contribute, and I believe the community-led model is a far better way of doing things.

I was delighted to see the provision of plastics recycling technologies developing in consumer areas in recent days. The Minister was with me when I helped bring Sabrina Manufacturing Group to Tipperary to start a plastics recycling plant there. He came down after I facilitated the group’s entry into Ireland and the plant’s location. The plant replaced the jobs that had been lost in Bord na Móna. These technologies are incredibly important. Sometimes I wonder whether we embrace them quickly enough and whether we work with partners outside the State to bring in these technologies quickly enough to get to the level of recycling we need. There are a huge number of other very exciting technologies which, dare I say, I did not have enough time to get through when I was sitting in the Minister’s seat, but they are out there and we can and should embrace them.

The scale of retrofitting we are carrying out, as proposed in the Minister’s policies, must be multiplied by hundreds. It will save the State in the long term in respect of both public and private housing, and we really need to redouble our efforts there. What is put out there is not ambitious enough.

My final point concerns education. As the father of two children who are always re-educating me and my parents - their grandparents - on environmental issues, such as recycling and so on, I am of the view that we really need to look at the school curriculum when it comes to such issues. We need to lead by example and ensure that we can get our educational institutions, particularly primary and secondary schools, carbon-neutral as quickly as possible and then move on to other educational facilities.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** We will move on to the Solidarity-People Before Profit slot. Deputies Barry, Boyd Barrett and Bríd Smith are sharing ten minutes.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** It is just Deputy Paul Murphy and me.

I will start by acknowledging what was more or less an online fight, but a big fight nonetheless, put up today by the climate movement to hold the Government accountable on the question of fracked gas from North America before it signs off on the projects of common interest on Friday. It took a row, a press conference and tens of thousands of emails from many people across Ireland, some of whom are here tonight - they are very welcome, I thank them

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for attending, and we will see them again tomorrow - to make the Business Committee and the Government see sense. We will discuss this issue tomorrow, so I will hold fire on most of this until then. However, I take the opportunity to thank the movement for holding the Government to account.

Going back to the statements made at the UN climate summit, one would have to be struck by Greta Thunberg's words, especially when she talked about the fantasy of eternal economic growth. It was a very anti-capitalist "we need system change" statement. Then one thinks of the fantasy of the words of our Taoiseach when he stated that we in Ireland are great because we will ban oil exploration off 80% of our shores sometime after 2035 - maybe even later, maybe 2040 or 2050 - but while we do that we will keep looking for gas because Corrib will run out and we will need it. If starting tomorrow we burned all the gas reserves and none of the oil or coal, then according to the Climate Change Advisory Council which advised the Taoiseach we would have a 66% chance of limiting warming to under 2°C above pre-industrial levels. This is a very skewed interpretation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report. It assumes that one is talking about the unknown reserves of fossil fuels and that we can keep digging for them because they are unknown. However, all the science tells us that it is 66% of the known fossil fuel reserves that was referred to. Would the Minister get on an aeroplane if he was told that he had a 66% chance of landing safely? Does he think, therefore, it is okay for the Government to continue to support fossil fuels with the same chance of crashing the entire planet? The Minister and the Taoiseach know that we will not stop burning coal and gas overnight globally and that we must stop burning any more reserves. We also know that if we leave 80% of proven reserves in the ground we have a chance of limiting global temperature increases.

The Taoiseach went to the UN, made flowery speeches and listened to Greta Thunberg and millions of schoolchildren. The other element of his solution was that we would increase carbon taxes and ring-fence them for climate initiatives. Interestingly, it is only a week from the budget and all the talk is about a €6 per tonne increase this year, which will be ring-fenced. Do the mathematics. I asked the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform about this. With €6 per tonne one will probably end up with €108 million to spend on climate initiatives. Does the Minister think that will be enough to sort out a just transition for the Bord na Móna workers and the people in Moneypoint? Does he think he will have enough to provide supports for those who need renewable energy in their homes and retrofitting? Indeed, will he have enough to start investing in renewable energy? The carbon tax will act as a double tax, a punitive measure on those who can least afford it.

At the same time, and this is very interesting, the Government continues to block the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Amendment) (Climate Emergency Measures) Bill 2018 and to support exploration for gas and oil. Through freedom of information requests and the good research carried out by journalists, we know that the lobbying that took place in this House was extraordinary. It was not just by the native fossil fuel industry but also by Exxon-Mobil and companies based in China. Some of the biggest fossil fuel giants in the world have been leaning on the Minister and his Department not to support this Bill. As somebody said, the Bill has spooked the fossil fuel industry. I hope the movement on the streets will also spook it.

The Minister continues to rely on profits to invest in renewable energy but he should create a State-run renewable energy company that will leave the environment and the planet secure and ensure a proper future for our children. If he relies on profit, he is taking the wrong road. That is exactly what has happened. The scientist Professor Kevin Anderson once said that nature

cannot be fooled. The Government might wish to pretend that fracked gas will emit less greenhouse gas than oil and that 1 million EVs on the road, a growth in the beef and dairy herd and hundreds of data centres are somehow a climate friendly policy, but the atmosphere and nature will not pretend. The climate will not join the Government in that pretence, but will continue to hurtle out of control.

I will conclude to give Deputy Paul Murphy the time he deserves. Next week will be the second Extinction Rebellion week. School students and others will be on the streets. Their first demand is that people tell the truth about science and what needs to be done, which the Department finds impossible. Had the Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, considered that demand in the UN, we would not have heard the flowery language but the truth about what the Department is not doing.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** People across the country better hope that politicians' hot air will not be covered by the carbon tax. If it is, we will be paying massive amounts of tax for the performances of the Taoiseach, who loves to go abroad, present himself as a champion for the climate and other progressive issues and pretend he is leading the way. At home, however, the policies remain the same. He remains bound to the interests of big agribusiness in this country and increasingly to the interests of fossil capitalism and big oil internationally.

He went to the UN and said that we will introduce a moratorium or ban on future exploration for oil. Good, let us see it happen. Let us pay tribute to those who are responsible for putting the pressure on Varadkar to go so far, such as Deputy Brid Smith and people outside in Extinction Rebellion, the climate strikers and those involved in the movements putting pressure on the Taoiseach. However, he went on very deliberately to draw a distinction between oil and gas, based on a sketchy note from the Climate Change Advisory Council, and to persist with the Government mantra about gas being a transition fuel. It is anything but, and sticking with it involves sticking with fossil fuels and carbon emissions and not making the rapid transition we need to a zero-carbon economy by 2030 and to renewable energy.

I wish to refer to some points made by Professor Barry McMullin of Dublin City University, DCU, who wrote a scathing article in *Green News* about the advisory note the Government is relying on so heavily with regard to gas. He concluded, "In effect, it appears that the CCAC has strayed into embedding a tacit, and ultimately repugnant, *political* premise (namely, a globally *unjust* transition) as a basis for its supposedly purely *scientific* advice". The reality is that we must transition not from oil to gas but from oil, gas and fossil fuels to green energy. Ireland is better placed to do it than almost any other country in the world. It could be leading the way in that and in the creation of green jobs as well.

It is not accidental that such a distinction is being made at a time when the Government wants to push ahead, without any democratic oversight and with public money, with a massive LNG terminal. What is involved in that is not just any gas, but fracked gas, which is significantly extra-dirty gas, with significantly more carbon. It also represents significant health problems such as cancer and the like for people where gas is fracked. It is incredibly cynical of the Government to agree to a ban on fracking here yet to think it is okay to import massive amounts of fracked gas from the US, store it and distribute it across the rest of Europe. It is incoherent and inconsistent with any idea that it understands the climate catastrophe we are facing and the urgent action that is required. Signing up for such a LNG terminal and spending such money on it will mean investing in fossil fuel infrastructure that will continue to operate for decades, up to 2050 at least. It shows the Government simply does not get it. Only a movement of people tak-

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ing mass, non-violent, direct action next week as part of the second Extinction Rebellion week and mass strike action will force it to take the action we need to implement the rapid green and just transition that is required.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** The Deputy should speak respectfully of individuals when calling their names.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I am sharing time with Deputy Connolly.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the UN climate summit. It was yet another summit on climate change with more talk, good intentions and very little action. Both China and the EU gave no new promises beyond the Paris Accord. The US reneged on its commitments. Russia gave no new promises beyond the Paris Accord. If we are expecting any of these so-called world leaders to save the planet, we are in serious trouble.

A key issue in climate change is war and the enormous amount of carbon and greenhouse gas emissions from military forces. The Pentagon is the world's single largest consumer of fossil fuels, yet at the Kyoto climate change talks, the US succeeded through intense lobbying in keeping military domestic fuel use out of UN inventories of national greenhouse gas emissions. At a UN summit in Copenhagen the rich income nations gave a commitment to raise \$100 billion for developing countries to finance adaptation. That amount is not to be sneezed at, but it represents just 1% of worldwide military spending.

Between 2001 and 2011, military spending increased by 92%. This is money that should be committed to tackling climate change. Instead, we have a huge waste of expenditure on tanks, military vehicles, aircraft and warships all of which are huge emitters of highly toxic carbon-intensive gases and this does not even take into account the gases released in explosions. Deadly combinations are involved. Military forces are huge contributors to climate change and climate change is a key factor in wars, in the struggle over water, land and scarce resources. In the Middle East and North Africa in particular, what is needed are not more UN summits but a clearout of imperialists and warmongers who dominate our planet.

I add my voice to concerns that, this Friday, the Government will include the liquefied natural gas terminal at Shannon in the list of projects of common interest, PCI, at a meeting of the European Commission. This meeting will agree cross-border infrastructure projects to link the EU's energy systems. There is a serious question as to whether this will mean the Shannon project gets to proceed without a strategic environmental assessment, SEA, required under existing environmental legislation. There are serious concerns that the Shannon terminal will be used to import fracked gas from the US. It beggars belief that we ban fracked gas being taken out of our soil in Ireland but include the Shannon LNG project in a PCI which comes from the US, a climate change denier.

It is important that the Minister comes back to the House with answers to our questions. Will he request a postponement of the regional PCI meeting until an SEA is carried out on all the Irish projects listed? Will he commit to a full evaluation of the climate impacts of imported fracked gas from the US? Will he expedite his Department's planned review of Ireland's energy security and ensure that our energy demand is made compatible with climate commitments under EU and international law?

The ordinary worker and the person on the street is not the polluter - it is the big fossil fuel companies which have polluted our planet. They should be the ones to pay the carbon tax and

put money into just transition, instead of forcing ordinary people to pay up again. I will be part of any movement that will oppose carbon tax being imposed on ordinary workers while the big companies are not being tackled. At the EU summit, Greta Thunberg said:

We are at the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you?

I could not agree with her more and I hope the Minister takes that on board.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I agree with my colleague about the military-industrial complex, which is the elephant in the room in these discussions. I will take the Minister to task for the absence of a written speech. It is a serious situation and we are beyond emergency so I would have expected him to have come here tonight after the UN summit to tell us what progress has been made since his plan was published. When we are in an emergency, we need monthly updates. The Department of the Taoiseach was to establish a climate action delivery board. Has that been established? The Government was to establish an independent climate action council. Was that established? As an Independent Deputy, my time is limited but I have to go through the documents when they should all be in a written speech from the Minister telling me what has been achieved since the plan was published.

The Minister said he wanted a more systematic engagement with young people and citizens. The time for engagement is over and young people and citizens want action. We had a Citizens' Assembly with 13 recommendations but as far as I can see, the Minister has either ignored them or watered them down, which has certainly been the case in terms of timeframe. The summit was very unusual, given the emergency we are in. It was a special climate action summit, where the UN Secretary General went out on a limb to call on world leaders to attend and bring concrete realistic plans to enhance their nationally determined contributions by 2020. We are on target to miss our targets for 2020 and to miss our targets for 2030. We are looking at 2050 and talking about electric cars as the solution, along with small pieces of action as opposed to a transformative overall plan. If we do not have a transformative plan we are going no place.

We were put on notice of this in Paris in 2013 and at the convention in Rio of 1992. This has not happened overnight. In 2015, Trócaire told us that significant and persistent increases in national-level ambition in all countries were necessary if the temperature limits adopted were not to be breached. The UN is telling us we need to up our targets because the ones we have set are not sufficient. Some of the targets are good and the framework is good but it is like pieces of a jigsaw without the overall picture, which is that we are facing extinction. We need to take transformative action in everything we do and we need to lead.

We need to know what has happened since the Minister published his plan. What have the local authorities done today? I am going home tomorrow because Storm Lorenzo is coming and the people of Galway are bracing themselves. At the consultation process relating to the water framework directive, we were told that these were one-in-100-years events but they are now much more frequent than that and are the pattern for the foreseeable future. The Taoiseach spoke about our wonderful green country. He said the advisory council said gas needed to be there as a transition. I understand that the secretariat to the advisory council gave much more nuanced advice, to the effect that the use of new gas reserves should be contingent on us meeting our targets and climate justice. If we persist in taking gas out, we must evaluate how that will affect our targets and climate justice.

My biggest difficulty with this Government is a lack of faith, because its policies are inconsistent. Social Justice Ireland has pointed this out and I pointed it out last night on the subject of forestry. It is wonderful to think about planting so many million trees but we need a policy that is consistent with climate mitigation measures and climate justice and I do not see that. I am from Galway and we want public transport and to deal with the terrible problems on our roads but what is the Government proposing in the national planning framework? It is proposing more and more roads, more and more cars. The words in many of these documents are fantastic, such as “sustainable development”, but the roll-out has nothing to do with sustainability. The message is “business as usual” but wrapped up in nice green words.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important matter. I also welcome those measures we can and must take to arrive at a fair, just and proportionate response to the issue of climate change. I do not believe the Government has the slightest clue of what those words mean. It does not do “fair” or “proportionate” and I do not know if we can trust it with climate change.

Do I believe that the proposals put forward by the United Nations or the European Union on this issue are credible or enforceable? I have grave doubts. Recent history has caused severe doubts. The European Court of Auditors has made it clear that EU action to support carbon capture and storage and innovative renewables has not succeeded. Between 2008 and 2017, ambitious targets were set but EU support for demonstration projects achieved little by way of projects delivered and results achieved. The Government was high on promises and ambitious targets but little was achieved. The EU is preparing to launch the innovation fund for 2021 to help to speed up the transition to a low-carbon economy. Just look at the devastating impact that this Government’s response to a just transition has brought about in the midlands and at Bord na Móna. The Government was warned about what was happening there and now we find that it is borrowing money to pay wages because it has tied its hands behind its back and blindfolded the company without any initiatives to help it to transfer. We have lost our Bord na Móna plant in Littleton in Tipperary and many more of them are going to go. Bord na Móna is now saying that the entire workforce is under threat due to Government inaction on implementing just transition measures. Is the Minister listening to anyone? The Taoiseach’s speech to the UN was grand and rosy but his speech in the House some weeks ago incensed the farmers in rural Ireland, especially beef farmers, because he told us all that we should eat less beef because it is carcinogenic. Flippant statements such as that have done damage. Is that not a measure of the Government’s complete disregard and how its lack of action is impacting on people in jobs? Ordinary people, smallholdings and householders cannot be punished excessively in this area.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I am happy to contribute on this important matter. Every day we are made aware of the climate emergency that we currently face. As individuals, we have a duty to try to reduce our carbon footprint, decrease our use of single-use plastic and be more environmentally conscious about our day-to-day activities. We have moved as a society. However, the Government is not serious enough about what it is trying to achieve, despite Ireland being one of the first countries to declare a climate emergency. I refer to the significant effort the people of west Cork had to go to last year, including the cost of a High Court challenge, to stop a plastics factory in Skibbereen and to stop the harvesting of kelp off Bantry Bay, which would have been an environmental disaster. If the Minister had the interests of the environment at heart, he could have stopped it from going ahead, since there was provision for him to do so.

Only a few months ago on Leaders’ Questions, I asked the Taoiseach to help to set up a park-and-ride service from west Cork to the train station daily. If this was run properly, hun-

dreds of cars would be taken off our roads daily in west Cork, but when the proposal met the Minister, Deputy Ross' claws, he threw it out. We are very lucky to have a private operator, Damien Long, who is now opening a new daily service from west Cork to Cork. It took a private operator to take on the work of the State so that cars could be taken off the road. Instead, this Government has made continued attacks on rural and farming communities about the negative effects that their livelihoods are supposedly having on the environment and how we should reduce our red meat intake. I reject this as a total red herring. If all our farmers decided to stop working tomorrow and close shop, it would make little or no impact on our environment and have a much greater negative one on our economy. We need to find a reasonable and a functioning balance. Last year, when our Taoiseach was in Europe, our European counterparts called Ireland environmental laggards. It is no wonder because we are making sensational statements but engaging in little action on the ground. Instead of the High Court intervening regarding the harvesting of kelp in Bantry Bay, the Government could have intervened and made sure there was no environmental disaster. Instead of taking tens of thousands of cars off the roads in rural areas, the Government could have worked on transport but did not. The Minister needs to get his own house in order before he starts to point at everybody else.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am sorry that I do not agree with anything that has been said here tonight. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA, admits that climate change occurs because of changes in the Earth's solar orbit and not because of human activity. For more than 60 years, NASA has known that changes occurring to the planetary weather patterns are completely natural and normal. The space agency has, for whatever reason, chosen to let the man-made global warming hoax persist and spread to the detriment of human freedom. Farmers who have cattle were supposed to be causing massive methane gas emissions. Now the very professor who told us that 15 years ago is admitting that he exaggerated by two thirds. In yesterday's NASA papers, this was highlighted, and it was referred to in a television programme yesterday. At times, the Earth is 5 million km closer to the sun than at other times and that is what causes the dramatic changes in our temperature and weather. At different tilts, the Earth's seasons become much more extreme while at lower tilts, they become much milder. If we had to sum the whole thing up in one simple phrase, it would be that the biggest factor influencing weather and climate patterns on Earth is the sun. Depending on the position of the Earth and the sun at any given time, climate conditions will vary dramatically and even create drastic abnormalities that defy everything that humans thought they knew about how the Earth worked.

There was a lot of talk about history yesterday evening and we are glad that the Minister for Education and Skills will listen to people who wanted history to remain as a core subject for the junior certificate, but if we go back in history, the weather changed dramatically at different times. The 1730s was the wettest decade in history. In the 1740s, two years of incessant rain resulted in a famine that caused more than a third of Ireland's population to die. There was a heavy snowfall in 1917, when it snowed for two months, with up to 52 mm even in Cork. There was severe flooding in Dublin in 1802 and the big wind in 1839, which blew most of the country asunder. Before the Famine in the 1840s, there was unusually wet weather. In 1903, there was a very severe storm during which 2,000 trees were uprooted in Birr, 4,000 in Kilkenny and 2,000 in the Phoenix Park. In October 1927, nine fishermen were lost off Mayo in a storm and ten more were lost off Galway.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** History will tell us that there were severe climatic situations in different centuries. Going back to the 13th and 14th century, the heat in this country was

unbearable. In another decade, we had what was known as a mini-ice age.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** We are harsh when we suggest that a carbon tax be applied to people in the coming budget.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** The Deputy is a long way over time.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** People laugh at the thought that it will be ring-fenced or put in a drawer somewhere to be kept safe.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** I have been more than lenient.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** It is only another stunt to get more money out of hard-pressed people who are paying enough tax as it is.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is amazing that we are having this debate as Storm Lorenzo approaches the west coast of Ireland. Our thoughts are with my own friends in Lahinch, Galway, Inishbofin, Achill and many other places, north and south. The west coast is going to get a real hammering tomorrow and I pray that everybody there will be safe and that our homes will be secure. While there have been nights of the Big Wind in the past, Oíche na Gaoithe Móire, we are now loading the dice. The basic physics of climate change are not disputed by any scientist of note. The reality is that the energy in the ocean, which is now warming along with the atmosphere, is being transferred into our weather system. Rain is increasing, droughts are spreading and a whole range of different effects are being felt which will present a huge challenge to our country and the wider world.

*8 o'clock*

In debating what went on in New York last week, first and foremost we have to pay tribute to Greta Thunberg. What she has done in articulating the science in a really clear and concise way has been very significant and important. She and the other people involved in the climate strike movement deserve great credit. The simple maths referred to in the scientific advice delivered a year ago by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shows that, if we are to keep a 66% chance of staying below a rise of 1.5°C, which would still have massive consequences, we can only emit approximately another 420 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The world continues to blaze, putting out approximately 40 gigatonnes a year. One does not need to be a genius to see the urgency and the scale of the challenge we face in stopping those emissions.

I missed the Minister's speech here because I was stuck in a meeting on Brexit, but I heard his speech to the Environment Ireland conference this morning. He said something at the end which I believe is true. I cannot remember the name of the historian from the 1940s he cited but, if I am repeating the Minister correctly, he cited this historian as saying that great countries show their worth, value and greatness at great moments in history by rising to great challenges. This is a challenge like none before. If humankind is to make this leap and to avoid the tipping points and limits which Greta Thunberg sets out, this is the biggest challenge of all time. I believe this country will rise to this challenge and that doing so will make our country a better place to live. Taking it on will give us a sense of purpose, bring us together and unite us as a people.

This change can be for the better. It will require us to eat more healthily, to travel lighter,

to waste less and to be energy clever. The Irish people are now up and open to meeting this challenge but they are not being served by the lack of ambition and vision of this Fine Gael and Independent Alliance Government. I will give some examples to back up that point.

On energy, the Government does not seem to understand that there has been a fundamental shift within the environmental community in recent years away from putting all the emphasis on market solutions and individuals' responsibility for what they do. Instead of focusing on the consumer end of this fossil fuel pipeline, we need to focus on stopping it at source and on keeping those fossil fuels in the ground. The maths set out by Greta Thunberg show that all fossil fuels have to stay in the ground including coal, peat, oil and particularly gas. The persistent notion that gas is a transition fuel is one of the greatest risks to taking on this challenge successfully and doing what science tells us we must. While I welcome the end of exploration licences for oil in deep waters, the Government must go further and extend this measure to all new licences for any offshore oil or gas exploration. Gas is not a transition fuel. If we burn as is planned, we will pass the tipping point and set the world on a downward spiral.

Similarly, if we are to take climate science seriously, we have to stop building gas infrastructure. We have to start here by not proceeding with the liquefied natural gas terminal in the Shannon Estuary. We should take it off the project of common interest, PCI, list and give a clear signal that this country will develop an alternative renewable power system and run our transport systems, our heating systems and every other system on electricity, which emits zero carbon, which is secure and cost-efficient and in which we have some expertise. If we put our mind to it, we can run and power our whole country in this way. There are no ifs, buts or qualifying that position. We have to stop investing in gas infrastructure. That applies to Europe as well as to Ireland. Europe now has secure arrangements to share gas, so our supply is much more secure than it was five or ten years ago. There is a massive over-investment in gas importation infrastructure across Europe. We should not add to it.

With regard to transport, I keep coming back to one simple truth. For all the talk about us taking climate action, there is not one single major public transport project in the planning system or being built at present whereas 51 major motorways and national roads are either being built or in the planning system. That has to stop. If we are serious about climate change, we have to switch. The crying shame in this is that the switch will actually make for a transport system that works while a roads-based system will not. We have to begin making massive investments in walking, cycling and public transport straight away as an emergency response. We have to admit that the national development plan is totally unfit for purpose. No climate assessment of the plan was carried out. There is no sense that climate emissions will fall or that electric vehicles will solve the problem. We are facing gridlock as well as pollution. We need to change our entire transport system. There is no sign of the Government doing that and that must change.

A third example of an area in which the Government is not changing is in land use. It defies logic that, every time we come back to the core issue of what we need to do to tackle climate change and the need for a land-use plan, the Government says no. It is beyond belief that last night Fine Gael yet again failed to recognise the scale of the biodiversity and climate crises or to recognise that we need to change our forestry model to allow for a much more biodiverse woodland system.

I could go on. At every turn we see this Government refusing to take the actions that any neutral observer would say are appropriate. In the area of waste, the continued blocking of our

Waste Reduction Bill 2017 has been a shameful black mark on the record of this Government. The failure to accept the Just Transition (Worker and Community Environmental Rights) Bill 2018, which we brought before the Dáil two weeks ago, again runs contrary to everything we would be doing if we were serious. We have to make this a socially just transition as well as an ecological one. The failure to recognise that and to put resources into the mediation services and development teams we need in the midlands and elsewhere to make this transition demonstrates again that this Government does not take the issue seriously and is not leading the way.

I will give a final example of what needs to change. In his speech to the Environment Ireland conference this morning, the Minister said that Government and everyone else has accepted the need for a greater role for, and oversight from, the Oireachtas in what is happening. This fell at the first hurdle upon our asking for a fuel poverty study and a public consultation on the two options for the carbon tax, which are to use the revenue for climate measures such as retrofitting or to give the money back, which the Taoiseach agreed was the optimal approach. The Department of Finance completely failed to carry out that public consultation properly. Rather than setting out two options, it set out nine and it gave no explanation of the options, nor did it share the ESRI analysis which showed how a cash-back, fee and dividend model would deliver social justice in addition to cutting emissions.

All of this has to change, quickly and at scale. If we make those sorts of changes, we will bring our people with us. In fact, they are ahead of the political system. They are willing and ready to stand up to the challenge of letting this country shine as we address this incredible task ahead of us. My party, working with every other party, looks forward to making that leap.

**Deputy Hildegard Naughton:** The world leaders turning out at the UN climate summit last week, in addition to the increasing scale of climate marches around the world, have underlined yet again that climate change and how we respond to it comprise the defining issue of our time. For the first time in Ireland we have, through the Government's climate action plan, a structured pathway towards meeting our climate change targets out to 2030 and beyond. This plan was heavily influenced by the report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, which I chair. We now have a comprehensive and credible plan that will be updated annually. I urge everyone in this Chamber to work together, as the joint committee will continue to do, to realise the climate action laws and policies that will help Ireland to reduce its emissions in line with its international commitments.

In particular, I encourage the House to fast-track the climate action Bill, which will introduce the groundbreaking governance changes recommended by the joint committee, such as the establishment of the standing committee that will ensure accountability of the Government to the Oireachtas on climate action and an enhanced, independent climate action council to recommend five-year carbon budgets and identify a pathway for our emissions reduction targets out to 2030 and beyond.

I also encourage colleagues to attach priority to the marine planning and development management Bill, which is due to come before the House shortly. It will streamline the consent regime for offshore generation. We have enormous and thus far largely untapped potential for renewable energy off our coast and we need to move quickly to capitalise on this.

To decarbonise our electricity sector, the climate action plan has a target of having 70% of our electricity come from renewables by 2030. Achieving this would enable us to capitalise on the significant job opportunities for coastal communities and the international investment that

a vibrant offshore sector would bring, in addition to improved security of supply. Crucially, it would enable us to decarbonise our economy and reduce emissions. I look forward to engaging positively with my colleagues on the joint committee and with Members of this House.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** As the Minister is well aware, Bord na Móna has had a very proud history of generating energy throughout the country for many decades. It also took very seriously, as part of its remit, the generation of jobs across communities in Kildare, Laois, Offaly and across the rest of the midlands. I am very heartened by my engagement with the current senior management in Bord na Móna because it takes this responsibility just as seriously today.

Storm Lorenzo, which is on our doorstep and due to arrive tomorrow, will join the other famous storms we became so familiar with, including storms Ophelia, Emma and Ali. We know the threats and reality of climate change now. There can be no denying it. We know what changes need to be made. In dealing with Bord na Móna, I am heartened by the changes it is making to its business model to try to continue to provide a source of employment and opportunities in a more climate-friendly way. It is using its large landbank to be a positive player in sequestering carbon as we move forward. At the heart of this is the concept of a just transition for Bord na Móna workers, their families and their communities who are so dependent on the income all the way along.

With every crisis and challenge, there are great opportunities. There is a lack of skilled retrofitting staff and staff associated with the technologies of which we will need so much more. As revenue from carbon tax and carbon pricing increases, we will have further opportunities to invest in these key areas. We need to call on all the agencies of the State. I commend the work done to date through the whole-of-government approach. In areas such as social protection, we have the back-to-enterprise allowance. Through education, we can reskill workers. The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation can assist those who want to start their own business. We must support the workers who avail of the job opportunities across the midlands so we can retain the really important economic activity across rural communities in the midlands. Bord na Móna will serve as the perfect pilot to roll out just transition.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Having watched the UN debates on the television, I believe Greta Thunberg showed clearly how the next generation is facing the future and educating all of us on the changes we have to make. If there is one point I need to make, it is a very simple one. It is about education. If the Greens turn off our oil and gas, that will be fine once we make sure the public does not object to infrastructure that is essential to bringing wind and wave energy to our population. One of our main problems is that sometimes tens of thousands of people object to new renewable energy infrastructure. This drive is led by those who really should know better. The most important message of Ms Thunberg that we must take on board concerns education. We must inform ourselves and accept that changes are coming. We must embrace them and welcome them, and we must stop objecting to infrastructure for energy from renewable sources.

My second point is that the Government is doing a lot about public transport. Some €7.5 billion has been spent on transporting millions of people, by way of BusConnects, Metrolink and the DART expansion. This should be accounted for in making comparisons. I challenge the Green Party to identify the roads it will cut. Will it stop the bypassing of Ardee or Julianstown? People do not have a choice when they have to commute to work if there are no public transport options available.

**Deputy Eamon Scanlon:** The Dáil has laid the groundwork for Ireland to become a cli-

mate leader. We passed a law to ban onshore fracking, and Ireland's sovereign wealth fund has divested itself of fossil fuel investments. The Joint Committee on Climate Action produced an impressive blueprint for action to cut emissions. In May 2019, we ensured that the Dáil declared a climate and biodiversity emergency. We supported the climate emergency measures Bill and voted in favour of progressing it in March this year. I commend the many advocacy groups that played such a significant part in creating the context and raising the ante to highlight these issues and insisting on progressing to this point. I include every child who marched just a few weeks ago.

I am concerned about plans to build import terminals to bring fracked gas from the United States. Ireland banned onshore fracking because of its significant impact on public health and the damage to water sources. Listening to witnesses from other countries, we learned of the environmental damage done to their areas. Just two years on, it appears the Government is going to improve the Shannon LNG terminal for the project of common interest list, and this is before the joint committee, on 9 October, has any chance to make its case. I am glad the Business Committee has agreed to allow the debate tomorrow and give members an opportunity to express their concerns. The project is contrary to views of the European Union's agency regulators, who have recommended that the cost of the import terminals in Ireland far outweighs the benefits that could accrue.

Less than two weeks ago, many members of the Government and members from every party stood with young people in demanding urgent action on climate change. This is not just hypocritical on the part of the Government but it is also a direct challenge to the norms of democratic scrutiny. The Government's credibility on climate change has been badly damaged. There will be statements tomorrow. The Government needs to clarify whether it is planning to confirm plans with the European Commission on Friday to build gas import terminals in Ireland as a project of common interest. It would allow the importation of fracked gas from the United States. As said tonight regarding the Bill passed here two years ago to ban fracking in Ireland, there is a question over whether it is legal to allow fracked gas to be stored in this country. That is definitely worrying and it needs to be fully investigated.

I accept it is not part of the Minister's brief but the lands of the many thousands of farmers that have been designated as special areas of conservation have been left virtually worthless. They should be recognised in the climate change strategy in that they have the best grounds in the country for sequestering carbon from the atmosphere. These people have been left to the side. Their land has been left virtually worthless. They are getting little or no support. They should be taken into consideration in this context.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** A great deal has been said about the various issues. I want to focus on agriculture, farming and land use policy. My party disagreed with a portion of the report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, mainly with regard to the carbon tax. We also disagreed with the findings of the report on how to use our land in a way that works for communities, farmers and people in the agriculture sector. We took on a number of issues in that regard, one of which related to how afforestation is done. We believe every farm should have more forestry as a way of contributing to tackling climate change. We need to make that happen as quickly as possible. The structures are there to do it. We need to put incentives in place to encourage every farmer to be part of the climate action story by sequestering carbon on their own land.

There are significant opportunities within the farming sector to build and develop new sys-

tems in new sectors of agriculture. I am thinking particularly of biomass and biogas, which offer great opportunities. Our climate and our land resource mean we are able to grow an immense volume of grass, which can be used to produce biogas. Similarly, thousands of farm buildings with large roof space around the country could be used for solar power. This would enhance the renewable energy aspect of farm use.

The issue of gas on the Shannon terminal has been mentioned. Enough oil and gas has been discovered to destroy the planet several times over. It is ridiculous to say now that we are going to look for more of it again. Talking about importing fracked gas from North America flies in the face of everything we have done in this place in the past to make sure fracking is banned.

The reality is that the big business interests that fund and finance all of these industries are at the core of all of this. If we are going to make a difference, we have to tackle that. We have to make sure the flows of money that go into these dirty industries are stopped and blocked. That is one of the big things we need to do.

There has been great talk about carbon taxes on many occasions. This would involve trying to put a tax on small farmers down the country when they go to put a drop of diesel into their tractors. If the Government was serious about taxing the polluter, it would put a carbon tax on the aeroplanes contributing substantial quantities of carbon. However, there is no tax whatsoever on aviation fuel. That is an example of what we need to do. People who can afford to fly all over the world on holidays or for other reasons can afford to pay a levy on air travel, which is not an essential. Most people have to heat their homes and have to travel. They have no options.

The Government does not seem to understand this problem. It has to work for the people and not just for big business and the sectors that are about making more and more profit. As long as we have a profit-driven economy, we will have a huge problem. We need to have an economy that is about people as well. We need to ensure they have a future.

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I could not possibly do justice to the many contributions that have been made. It is encouraging that Members are significantly on board for the sort of transformation we need. As Deputy Eamon Ryan said, an existential threat of this scale gives us an opportunity to challenge our civilisation to step up to show its greatest creativity and its greatest capacity for collaboration. This is a real challenge.

I expect to have continuous scrutiny in this Chamber and to hear condemnation from some quarters of everything we have put into our plan. It has struck me during this debate that many people are looking for some magic change. They seem to think that by blocking particular infrastructure, the change we need to make will suddenly be resolved. Deputy Connolly summed it up best when she criticised the plan on the basis that it offers many of the pieces of the jigsaw without presenting an overall picture. I contend that the difficulty with this challenge is that it requires all the pieces of the jigsaw to be slowly pieced together.

The Government has a significant responsibility to lead, be accountable and create the framework within which all of this can happen. Many Members want to pretend that all of this is about big business, as Deputy Martin Kenny suggested. They want us to believe that if we stop big business, we will suddenly have renewables and our homes and vehicles will no longer depend on fossil fuels. The reality is that we have to create many new infrastructures. As Dep-

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uty O'Dowd pointed out, many people, including people who say they are climate champions, are prominently opposing the very infrastructure we need for the new environment.

We need to help people to switch from high fuel-emitting activities. Ireland is one of the highest users of fossil fuels in Europe. We have to see how we can change our patterns of transport and home use, our renewables, the way our industries work, the way our waste system works and our agriculture sector. That involves helping individual farms, enterprises and homes to make changes in practical ways. Those are the pieces of the jigsaw that make up the big picture.

It would be great if there was some breakthrough idea that would suddenly lift all of this burden of change from us. It is not realistic to suggest that everything will be resolved if we suddenly close down big oil. The users of fossil fuels have become dependent on them. Companies have been making profits from fossil fuels for many years, but it is a sunset industry that will gradually fall away. We still have to find the transition, create the roadmap and bring people along the road. I think that is the challenge.

Regardless of who is sitting in this seat, he or she will face the same challenges. I have done eight roadshows. I have been going around the country to talk to people. I have met many people who, like the Deputies from the Rural Independent Group, believe we are asking far too much of them and have suggested that they need to be paid first. We have to find ways of persuading such people to make the changes. There is no point in coming into this House without talking about meeting challenges like retrofitting 500,000 homes, or planting an additional 250,000 trees over the next decade. Today, 4% of vehicles are electric vehicles, but we need to increase that to 100%. Similarly, we need to move an additional 500,000 daily commuters onto public transport or active means of commuting like cycling. Those are the nuts and bolts of the change we have to make. If we are to get five times as much renewable energy onto our grid, we will need more wind farms and more solar farms and we will need to develop offshore infrastructure and interconnectors.

All of these elements make up the jigsaw to which Deputy Connolly rightly referred. One can be very critical of any piece of the jigsaw, but it is part of the overall effort. That is the challenge for us in this House. I never expect plaudits. I am around here long enough. The job of Opposition Deputies is to criticise. My job is to learn from their criticism and implement it as best I can in policy changes as they evolve. I try to do that. I try to listen to what people are saying and integrate their suggestions where I can. That is why I took up the concern about exploration. I obtained the scientific advice and I made a decision on the basis of that advice. I have decided to stop exploring for oil but to continue exploring for gas. That is the way decision-making has to be done in this area. Of course, this approach does not have the clarion call of the introduction of a Private Members' Bill. It is more deliberative and it is slower. It involves building the data to make the decision. That is the only way we can do this. We have to make the choices that impose the least burden on people while creating the most opportunity.

### **Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** The Government Chief Whip wishes to put a proposal before the House.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Seán Kyne):** It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, and the Order of the Dáil of today, that any division which would normally be taken at the weekly division time on Thursday, 3 October shall be taken in the weekly division time on Thursday, 17 October, and consequently, the statements on the development of an LNG facility in Ireland shall be taken immediately after the motion re the reappointment of five members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority (back from committee).

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Declan Breathnach):** Is that agreed? Agreed.

### **Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2019: Order for Second Stage**

Bill entitled an Act to amend the Broadcasting Act 2009 to amend and extend the power of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland to impose a levy on certain broadcasters; in relation to the levy, to amend provisions concerning exemptions, deferrals and refunds; to provide for payment to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland of a portion of fees from television licences; to amend provisions concerning content provision contracts; to provide for a scheme of grants for promotion of professional journalistic practices in certain sound broadcasters; to amend the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000; and to provide for related matters.

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

### **Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2019: Second Stage**

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am pleased to introduce this Bill because it is timely that we have a serious debate around broadcasting. There are major changes in the broadcasting arena and none of us need to be told the pace of that change. It is having an impact on the way in which people receive their media. There has been a significant move away from traditional linear television and radio towards consuming material from online services, which has had an impact on many of those who are seeking to provide linear broadcasting and newspaper media. This is a tough change and the environment has become difficult. All Deputies have recognised this and we have had useful debates on the value of local media and the need to recognise its contribution to public service broadcasting.

The Bill is also an occasion for us to be able to recognise the importance of the public service provided by broadcasting in our community. It is, of course, primarily provided by the two major public service broadcasters, RTÉ and TG4, but it is also important to recognise the significance of local radio across the country in providing a forum for informed debate on

the issues of our time, access to information about what is happening in the community and offering education opportunities and entertainment, all of which are important. While growing institutions such as Netflix provide high-quality levels of production, these platforms will not be interested in delivering the distinctive Irish content that people deserve to receive. It is important that we create within our broadcasting environment opportunities for new talent to emerge, Irish content to be created and innovation in the sector to be delivered.

The proposals in the Bill are starting the process of making significant changes. Some are related to issues that have been of concern around the levy in respect of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI. The Bill provides that it will be part funded to a maximum of 50% from television licence receipts. It is intended that any consequent reductions in levy contributions would be applied across the board by the BAI in order that all broadcasters would benefit in equal proportion from the measure. It is proposed that doing this will provide scope to exempt smaller community radio stations from the levy altogether. The Bill allows the Minister to decide what percentage of the levy to fund from television licence receipts.

People will welcome other changes, such as the fact that the BAI will be able to accrue a level of working capital to meet its day-to-day expenses without the need to pursue costly and burdensome borrowing facilities. The BAI will be granted the authority to determine exemptions and deferrals from the levy depending on the qualifying income of individual broadcasters and the level of regulation they require. As the BAI is being given greater flexibility in regard to which broadcasters are covered by the levy and to what extent, there are significant improvements in that regard.

We are also introducing an important provision in the Bill, namely, granting bursaries to journalists in local or community radio stations. It is intended that approximately €500,000 will be made available by the BAI to support 20 bursaries each year, which will benefit emerging talent in rural communities seeking to support and maintain regional broadcasting services.

We have had a wider debate on the role of the sound and vision fund. At present, 7% of receipts are set aside by the BAI for the fund. There is a need to consider whether that should be changed and I would be open to legislation that would alter that. We need to provide scope for more creative content to become available regardless of where it comes from, and that is an important vehicle in terms of how we might proceed.

As the House knows, there has been considerable debate about the way in which the current licence fee is subject to considerable evasion. A cross-governmental working group was established by the previous Minister to assess this issue. Its report examined all of the various options, including collection. I accepted the recommendation of the working group on opening up the collection of television licence fees to public tender, and I will bring forward an amendment on Committee Stage to give effect to this. Where that has been done in other jurisdictions it has considerably reduced the evasion level. The current evasion rate in Ireland is 12%, compared with 7% in other countries. That offers a considerable increase of 5% in collection rates, which would represent about €10 million in additional funding if executed effectively.

We also have committed to a new broadcasting charge that would be independent of the device used, but we need time, as recommended by the working group, to introduce that. A five-year period is proposed, during which time its workings will be developed. The working group identified a number of complexities in respect of introducing it immediately. While some people had suggested adding it to the local property tax, the base for that is different because the

television licence fee is related to the occupier, rather than the owner of the premises.

We will need to keep this area under review. We can now start identifying how we can move to a broader definition than is the case for the current licence fee, because the system that has been in place for many years, which links it to the ownership of a television, as currently defined, is becoming out of date. It will take time to develop a new system and carry out the necessary consultation on that but I want to move much more rapidly and start to make changes in respect of the funds available to the BAI for onward distribution to RTÉ, TG4 and the sound and vision fund.

I am conscious that this is a challenging time for RTÉ in particular. We have seen the challenges it faces following a significant decline of, I understand, 33% in its commercial revenues since the mid-2000s. The situation has stabilised for a number of years but it is a challenge. It is hard to see how that trend could be reversed.

As the BAI has pointed out, the audience profile for many of our public service broadcasters is becoming challenging. The age profile of the typical user is very high and usage of public service broadcast media declines as one moves down the age categories. RTÉ recognises the need to transform its service in order to access a greater audience share, particularly among the younger cohort. It is committed to developing its online presence, including its web player, and providing the services that allow the web player to be relevant and quickly consumed by younger users. That challenge will take time to overcome. RTÉ is working on a transformation plan which is of great importance if it is to continue to make the quality of contribution it has always made.

The BAI indicated that RTÉ required additional funding. In the budget last year and the previous year the Government was able to deliver improved funding to support RTÉ and TG4. The BAI set out proposals for the improvement of the latter organisation. It is important to recognise that the BAI has developed new metrics to evaluate the impact of public service broadcasters. They take account of a wider range of indicators of the broadcasters' impact and relevance, including penetration of key audiences, which is a very important test of the relevance of what is being produced.

Although the Bill is important in itself, it is also part of a continuing programme of reforms which we will need to introduce in the coming years to ensure the framework for the support of the public service broadcasting all Members recognise as being of significant importance is relevant and capable. I look forward to the debate on the Bill and considering proposals put forward by Oireachtas Members. We will seek to accommodate as much change as possible on Committee Stage.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I look forward to the passage of the Bill in due course. It will be supported by Fianna Fáil.

The Minister, rightly, identified the crisis in public service journalism which affects the broadcasting and print sectors. He identified the basis of the crisis, namely, the loss of commercial revenue to digital platforms and the way in which the younger demographic is consuming media. That is factual. The real crisis arises from the fact that, unfortunately, many of the organisations which support, preserve and protect public service journalism are struggling with the change necessary to meet the needs of those who consume information on digital platforms. It has taken time to get to this stage. It is a challenge to transform and migrate to these plat-

forms.

The difficulty and source of the crisis are that the younger population is consuming data from sources that are not trusted. I categorise it as data, rather than properly curated information. The information is not researched and has the potential to undermine the democracy of the State. I refer only to this jurisdiction in that context because that is the extent of our responsibility in drafting legislation. That said, it is a worldwide problem. For evidence of it, one can look to our nearest neighbour where digital platforms were utilised by those who promoted and desired Brexit. We saw the dissemination of what could be termed questionable information, if one was being kind. It could also be called fake news if one wished to employ the language of certain others. It was certainly poorly researched information. In some cases, it had little basis in fact, while in many others it no basis in fact. It was presented in a manner that led some people to believe there was validity to it. This has happened on many occasions. It happened during the most recent US presidential election when certain facts were distorted and presented on digital platforms. For the younger generation, the branding of the platform gives credence and credibility to the message, even though, interestingly, the platforms accept no editorial responsibility and present themselves purely as facilitators. Obliging digital platforms to stand over the content on their sites or quickly remove it will be another battle.

There was an example of this type of misinformation in the House this evening. A Deputy who seeks to deny climate change read from a print-out of a story which I recently saw on Facebook. The story attempts to gain credibility by referring to NASA. It has no basis in fact, but it is propagated throughout the Facebook environment among a certain group of people who have sought, for their own interests in some cases, to deny climate change.

A similar issue arose in respect of vaccines. A person presenting as a doctor wearing a white coat and with a stethoscope encouraged parents in this country and further afield to believe certain vaccines would harm their children. As public representatives, many Members of this House have been confronted by parents in a school yard or at a school gate who proclaim the veracity of the claims made by a doctor on Facebook and YouTube and ask whether we are aware of how damaging the vaccines would be for children. The only connection between the individual in a white coat and the stethoscope that gave him or her credibility was the fact that they were both on YouTube and Facebook. YouTube and Facebook do not accept any responsibility for the providence of their content. They are merely facilitators. In this great new world of connectedness, all they do is connect people. How wonderful of them to give us all the great opportunity to connect: free speech; let us talk to each other; a little magic dust and it is a great world. Facebook, Google and YouTube rack up approximately €1 billion per week in profits, but they are not required to check the facts presented on their sites.

A local radio station in County Kerry, Clare, Sligo or Leitrim cannot allow anyone on air to present unverified facts, even though the station's licence only covers a relatively small area. The station must exhibit solid journalistic principles and have trained staff who understand how to research a story, ensure there are at least two sources for it and that the facts are checked. That is what public service journalism is about. The challenge to public service journalism, even in relatively rural areas such as those I mentioned, comes from the global players. I know that the Taoiseach and certain others like to hang out with representatives of some of these companies. They are the places in which to be seen. What one says goes unchallenged. One can do this on these platforms. That is where one starts, perhaps with all the right intent and for all good reasons but yet over time it has the capacity to erode our democracy. To take it to the next step, if we move away from the local and regional stations and bring it to the national station,

the Minister rightly identified RTÉ is challenged for many reasons, but there is a challenge in trying to maintain that cost base at a time when there is other sometimes more salacious content, which is not sourced other than just somebody with an agenda who presents it.

The bulwark against misinformation in any democracy that holds all of us to account is an independent public service journalism, the Fourth Estate as it is often referred to. If one believes in that principle, one must accept it has to be paid for. It is no longer possible to support such a level of journalism from the commercial side of the house. From an advertising perspective, in terms of getting bang for one's buck and targeting, the digital platforms will provide a much better return for the advertiser. We must find a way to fund public service journalism properly. It will take much more than what is in this Bill. It is great to talk about 20 bursaries for young journalists. That is wonderful but it goes nowhere near what is required to protect, preserve and support public service journalism.

My party has produced clear policies on a number of occasions that, if implemented, would go some way in addressing the protection and preservation of public service journalism. I do not advance these cases for any particular medium. It is not about an individual newspaper or publisher. It is about how to protect the principle of public service journalism. When I talk to various journalists, be they in broadcasting, the print sector or some who have moved to digital platforms, the challenge is how they can develop their brand and transition it into a digital space. It is costly and takes time and there is a lot of catch-up. I recognise some of them are making an effort but they are not getting the return. It is costly to do it and they will need support.

Regarding the types of things that need to happen, we must address the evasion of the licence fee. It is estimated to be able to produce somewhere between €30 million and €40 million. Unfortunately, I disagree with the Minister's proposal. He is going to change the tender process, which will have an impact on An Post. That change will create a problem somewhere else. I am not sure how much it will deliver. We can look to what they have done in the UK. The Minister is telling the successful bidder who will be awarded the contract that they will have only five years to do this. I do not know if they will invest enough to get a return. The right thing to do would not have been to kick this out but to step up to the plate, as we know what is happening. Quite a number of homes have a device that does not fall within the definition in the Bill. Therefore, we should change the definition and make it device agnostic. However, if one is consuming public service content, one should pay the licence fee and we should allow the Revenue Commissioners to collect it. That would give equity to the 75% or 80% of the population who are already paying it who would like to see everybody pay their fair share. I have heard the argument that this issue will be another saga like Irish Water. With respect, 75% or 80% of the public were not paying for water. That is a completely separate argument and it should not have frightened off anybody, and it needed to be addressed. Some people do not have a television. It comprises a handful of houses. As long as they satisfy the people who are collecting the licence fee, sign whatever waivers are required and do not have to pay, that will get the Minister out of that problem.

Some of the €35 million, €40 million, €50 million or whatever amount of revenue would accrue from the licence fee could go to RTÉ to fill the gap that exists. It has its own transformational change to make, which it needs to address quickly. We need to see the director-general present that. She has indicated she will and I am sure she has the capacity to do it. We must recognise there are legacy issues in RTÉ. It is not a flexible company. There are unions imbedded in the organisation for a very long time. While we would like to see the organisation make

changes more quickly they will be hard fought. There has to be a move - the organisation will need the support of Government - to consider the introduction of compulsory redundancies. It has not been able to get its numbers reduced in line with expectations and tough decisions need to be made. That can be done in a way that supports the bright future of the organisation.

We produced a draft Bill which proposed ring-fencing 30% of the new money collected from those who were not paying the licence fee to go to a sound and vision style fund that would be used to support public service broadcasting in the independent sector in the local and regional stations. They provide such a phenomenal level of service to their areas and to the public. They are at the local matches, in the court room, at county council meetings and they cover local festivals. They provide a phenomenal return to their communities. I accept when they got their licence, there was a requirement for 10%, or whatever percentage, of public service content, news and current affairs. That was very doable in a different time when the advertising revenues were flowing. They are not there anymore. Unfortunately, many of the stations are struggling to employ good quality journalists who know what it is to verify a story, what a story is and understand what station audiences want and how one preserves and protects the stories from their individual areas. We must ensure we do not lose any more of that. They are operating on a shoe string. With the greatest of respect to the Minister, and I have considerable respect for his capacity to get on and take tough decisions and he has done it in other areas, I do not believe we can wait five years, having regard to the local and regional stations.

We depend on our public service media in times of crises. I am conscious that while we are debating this Bill there are people in every one of those local stations, and I am sure there is a team in RTÉ tonight and in all radio stations, wondering how they will address the storm that is approaching us, how they will be the stations to which the public will turn in a time of crisis. The real issue is whether in another three or four years they will have the capacity and the wherewithal to deliver in times of crises, not only in covering such a weather event but all the other issues that arise.

We have work to do in this House. It is somewhat difficult when one is talking about the introduction of levies and taxes and use of the Revenue Commissioners as a method of collection. They are measures not necessarily always put forward from the Opposition's point of view. It normally throws the Minister the problem and suggests he sorts it out. We have gone a step further on more than one occasion in suggesting things that do not always find favour with the electorate but they are the right things to do. If one believes in public service broadcasting and public service journalism and that they have a value, then in my view I have a responsibility to put forward the proposals that I believe have the capacity to deliver, protect and preserve them.

It would be wrong not to talk about the role of public service journalism or journalism generally within the print sector because it is also struggling. We have seen what has happened in recent years. I put forward a proposal previously, which I may have mentioned to the Minister, to examine the advertising streams that go on to the digital platforms, which do not see themselves as publishers. It is time to introduce a levy on advertising on these platforms and for it to be used to fund another stream of income to the State that would again be ring-fenced for supporting journalism within the print sector.

None of these funds should be administered by politicians. I suggested in the past the role and remit of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland be broadened to address media in its entirety through the administration of the various streams of funding so we can in a real way support journalism.

It would be the citizens supporting journalism and not seen as some sort of a hand-out from the Minister or political party of the day. That would be embedded in the system and very much seen as citizens supporting the principle of an independent and free public service journalism with no encumbrance, other than to meet the standards as set down by the BAI.

*9 o'clock* At the time, I suggested that the BAI, in its support of the print sector, would broaden its remit and involve personnel from the Press Council of Ireland. I also believe it is time for the Ministry to take on a role of media generally which overarches and embraces the print sector as well. One will find a level of favour and acceptance from that.

I reserve the right to bring forward some amendments. I am prepared to work with the Department on these. I hope the Minister will not use the money message on them, however, as this has become a way of knocking back certain Bills. We do not have five years. This side of the House will work with the Minister, even if it is not overly popular in certain quarters, to bring forward a method of ensuring a source of funding to support a sector important to the State and show the way in this regard. Other countries have done it. There are other supports for the print sector in other countries. We would not be out of sync in this area. I can share some of the research I have in that area with the Minister. RTÉ needs the Minister's support and assistance soon. From the people I have spoken to in the organisation, it is clear there is a crisis. I know the Minister will be having meetings with representatives from RTÉ.

We must bring forward some amendments. The Bill is a start but goes nowhere towards meeting the crisis. To some extent, it assists the Government to live up to a commitment given by a former Taoiseach which was to reduce the BAI levy for local radio stations. It has taken some time to come to fruition. There is an issue with some of the local community radio stations. By getting LEADER funding, they go over the €250,000 threshold. This funding is to support staffing at these radio stations. Will the Minister's officials re-examine this provision again? If they are not in a position, I can bring forward an amendment to exclude all community radio stations because they are not-for-profit. Some of the larger ones support educational programmes for journalists through LEADER, which is like what the Minister is trying to do with the bursaries. This could technically put them over the threshold limit. Will the Minister examine it?

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I welcome the Bill for its content but also because it provides an opportunity to have a wider discussion on public broadcasting. The Minister has taken the opportunity, as has Deputy Dooley, to set out many of the challenges we face. There is no secret that we have to face what some would describe as a "crisis" and others a "challenge" in public broadcasting. This plays out in many ways in funding, production and broadcasting itself. So many reports, analyses and policy documents have been done on public broadcasting, that they could be used to wallpaper my and the Minister's living room. What is really needed is action and a political consensus on how we fund public broadcasting. The starting point must be what constitutes public broadcasting. Once we agree what that is, the discussion should be on how we pay for it.

There are different views as to what constitutes public broadcasting. Both the Minister and Deputy Dooley spoke of the changing face of the media and communications. People interact with television productions in a way they did not five, ten, 20 or 30 years ago. People have much more choice. It is not just TV stations. They have Netflix, Amazon and other streaming content providers which are competing with public broadcasting.

In many countries, including Ireland, we have difficulties and challenges around the own-

ership of the media. We have issues with billionaire owners of private radio stations who do not like hard questions being asked of them. They draw up blacklists of journalists who are to be banned from the airwaves. I do not believe that is a healthy situation for any country. We have to be conscious of perceptions - some positive, some negative - that people have of our State broadcaster. However, I would not want to see a situation like in the United States with channels like Fox News which are anything but fair and balanced. Public broadcasting and the responsibility that RTÉ has in terms of impartiality is central to underpinning the essence of public broadcasting.

Local radio stations do likewise. Hand on heart, most of the coverage that I get to communicate with the people I represent is through my local radio station. Those of us outside Dublin are privileged to have local radio stations which provide a forum for political discussion. Local radio stations provide a significant public service in broadcasting but do not get paid for it. They do not get any subsidy in the way that RTÉ does. It certainly provides what many of us would see as a core public service. Many local and community radio stations provide that service but are struggling to survive, as is much of the print media. Local newspapers are equally struggling to survive. There are ways and means to help them.

Sinn Féin gives qualified support to this Bill but on Committee Stage we will table several amendments. The Bill amends and extends the power of the BAI to impose a levy on certain broadcasters. It allows the BAI to amend provisions concerning exemptions, deferrals and refunds. It provides for payment to the BAI of a portion of fees from television licences. It amends provisions concerning content provision contracts. It provides for schemes of grants for the promotion of professional journalistic practices in certain sound broadcasters. It amends the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000.

The BAI levy on broadcasters, as with any levy or taxation, should be progressive and equitable. While the Bill gives the BAI extra scope to impose different levies on different types of broadcasters, it seems from the Bill's wording that the BAI may not be compelled to do this. The Minister said that this will be the case but the wording, as it stands, suggests otherwise. The Bill states, "the authority may make separate levy orders for public service broadcasters, community broadcasters." It gives the BAI the potential to charge differently and then sets out the criteria for that regime. Basically, the BAI will calculate the levy in accordance with income from public and commercial streams. While the BAI is compelled to calculate levies based on income, it is not compelled to make separate levy orders for public community or for private operators. This appears to be a loophole through which community broadcasters may fall.

While the Bill gives the BAI the freedom to grant exemptions to the levy, it is not compelled to do so. Neither does it explicitly demand that community and non-profit broadcasters are exempt from the levy. It really is left to the hand of the BAI. A community broadcaster may apply for an exemption and the BAI may grant it, but nothing is guaranteed. As we have exemptions from income tax for low-paid workers, Sinn Féin believes we should have the same for low-income broadcasters. It is counterproductive, in my party's view, to do otherwise. The same applies for local radio broadcasters who operate on a different scale and playing field to RTÉ, Virgin Media, Newstalk or Today FM. Local radio brings a different angle to public broadcasting, one that complements rather than opposes RTÉ. This is merely a concern that I have with the way the Bill is drafted, and I look forward to Committee Stage where it is hoped we can tease this out further.

Of course, the BAI must be funded, but I cannot understand why its funds must come from the television licence. Given the crisis in funding for public broadcasting, why is this the case? The crisis is not only in RTÉ, although it is the national broadcaster that grabs all of the headlines when it comes to the challenges of funding for public broadcasting. The crisis is also for Irish independent producers, who have seen funding slashed over the past ten years by up to 50%.

On that, when we are looking at how we fund public broadcasting, we must look also at the principles that should underpin it. We should have greater enforcement because it is unfair that between 15% and 20% who do not pay are being subsidised by the 80% or 85% who do. Nobody accepts that is fair. There needs to be better enforcement and changes in that area. There are different views on how that is done, but we all accept that principle.

One of the principles that should underpin any change in how we fund public broadcasting, if we are to increase the pot, is that there should be more independent production. I met representatives from RTÉ recently and they accepted that is a considerable challenge. They accept that the amount they have spent on independent production has dropped from €80 million to €40 million over the course of the past ten years. That has a real impact in local communities where many of these independent production companies are based. A number of them are in my constituency and I have seen at first hand the work they do. There are many of them throughout the country that do splendid work. That is where the increased investment needs to be. We need to support independent producers in a much greater way than we have done.

A principle that should underpin reform of public broadcasting and funding to RTÉ is better accountability and transparency. While I recognise that we must protect the impartiality of RTÉ and its separation from political interference, which everyone wants to see, there is greater scope for accountability. The director general of the HSE is accountable to the Oireachtas in a way that the director general of RTÉ is not. I am a member of the Committee of Public Accounts and, last year, the committee had the Secretary General of the relevant Department come before it to explain the amount of money that transfers from the Department to RTÉ. The Secretary General was not in a position to answer any questions in terms of any transparency regarding that transfer of money. There was not what could be understood as constituting a proper service level agreement. There was a service level agreement of sorts, but different from what would be understood as a service level agreement. RTÉ is not compelled to be held in any way accountable for the money that it spends. My point is when the ask from RTÉ is that it needs more taxpayers' money, surely the *quid pro quo* must be better accountability and better transparency because everybody who spends taxpayers' money must be fully accountable for it. I refer not only to publishing reports, but full public accountability in a way that we do not have at present.

I spoke earlier of the positive impact of independent production. It has a knock-on effect in terms of jobs. It also has an effect in terms of exports. We should not forget that well-produced radio and television programmes are sold around the world. The content made by many indigenous radio and television producers should be one of our greatest exports given the wealth of talent on this island. The fact that it is not is as much an issue of resources as anything else. Only last week, the Taoiseach was in Los Angeles trying to drum up business for the film tax breaks we offer for international companies. As far as my party can see, this is merely the application of our tax haven model to film production. The real investment needs to be in talent at home. We need to increase the funding to independent production.

I asked earlier whether we should have a discussion on what constitutes public broadcasting. Because of the challenges that RTÉ faces with its finances, there has been an increased amount of syndicated content coming from the United States and Britain that might be cheaper to broadcast at certain hours and that has essentially replaced many of the independent production programmes that were made in the past. That is not public broadcasting or the best way for a public broadcaster to provide a service and to spend taxpayers' money. There are questions that need to be asked. There are greater challenges for RTÉ that it needs to face up to as well. Sometimes when this is raised, people raise the issue of the salaries at the top, and that is one of the issues. If one were to change the salaries, the amount of money that would be generated would not solve all the problems, nor would not solve the significant challenge that the organisation has. For many people, however, perception is reality. When people look at the six-figure sums that some of these presenters are on and them availing then of companies that are set up to ensure that they do not pay proper income tax and a portion of their money is allowable for corporation tax, that rankles with people. They ask if they as taxpayers are paying for this. It is not conducive to an appetite among the public for paying more. We must look at this, and not just from the point of view of doing the right thing, which we should.

I value public services. I value public broadcasting. I do not think a person who believes in public services cannot support public broadcasting. I genuinely support it. I genuinely believe it has to be funded. I genuinely believe that citizens and taxpayers have to make that contribution. The opposite of that is it in the hands of the private sector only and us not having the plurality and impartiality that we need in public broadcasting. I also accept that there are perceptions that people have that need to be addressed. Some are not real. Some are perceived but some are real. It is up to the organisation to deal with many of these challenges.

There is much more that I can say about the State broadcaster. An all-party report published by the Joint Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment last year set out a broad agreement on what should be done. It is a frustration, not only for RTÉ but also for other radio and television stations, when they do not see those recommendations being implemented. They ask why. What is the difficulty that is holding us back, including the Government, from doing the right thing to make sure that the basis of public broadcasting is sustainable? I would like the Minister to articulate some of that.

I want to deal with grants for journalists. One element of the Bill that is easily welcomed is the provision to allow the BAI to approve a number of schemes for the provision of funds towards annual grants to be awarded to local or community sound broadcasters for the purposes of supporting good professional journalistic practices and standards. The use of academia as the main route into journalism these days is a double-edged sword. This, coupled with the use of unpaid internships, has tended to privilege those who can afford to become journalists rather than those who want to become journalists. We need more working-class voices providing content. The one place where this happens is in local and community radio, and these grants will aid that process. I look forward to this scheme being rolled out across the State, including in my county of Waterford. Such schemes matter. Not everyone can afford to work and not get paid. The professional sectors are now cursed with this practice. Indeed, if I can make the point about the practice of employing people on if-and-when contracts that has become more evident in this sector as well, that is not good practice either. There was an independent report carried out into RTÉ that showed that a large volume of staff who should have been directly employed were on such if-and-when contracts. That also causes unease. These are the things to which I am referring when I talk about the *quid pro quo* and accountability. When a large amount of

taxpayers' money is being given to organisations, we should be able to set standards and at least have an accepted base for how they treat employees and the types of contract put in place.

Although we will be supporting the Bill, it can be improved. It is deeper than a technical Bill and could go further in many ways. We will, therefore, be tabling amendments. We need to ensure the BAI, as regulator, has real teeth. Unfortunately, the Bill does not touch on that issue. For example, as I said, in the past week we have seen that there is a blacklist in operation among certain radio stations. There should be universal condemnation across the House, including by the Government, of the fact that there are a number of radio stations and print media publications owned by a billionaire who can take a decision to blacklist journalists because he does not like what they say about him or his company. It is not acceptable for radio stations to do this as they have obligations to maintain impartiality. It makes it all the more difficult for those who do not engage in such practices and rightly say to us, whether it be a national or local radio station or even a private television company, that they also provide an element of public service and should be rewarded for it. It makes it very difficult for us to be able to say that is the case if we have companies like Newstalk and others that can blacklist journalists. That is not going to cut it when it comes to changes that would be of benefit to all of the others.

This is a welcome opportunity for us to have a wider debate. Because I am new to this brief, as the Minister knows, I would welcome an opportunity to meet him specifically to discuss the issue of public broadcasting. I have met Virgin Media, RTÉ and independent producers and want this issue to be addressed in the best possible way. I do not think there is acceptance by all parties of what all of the solutions are. I genuinely request a meeting with the Minister in order that we can discuss some of these issues. This is a useful debate. I will be supporting the Bill in principle but with the caveat that we will be putting forward amendments in a number of areas.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I do not propose to detain the House at this hour of the night with the three T's or a typical Second Stage speech on everything I know about broadcasting on the island of Ireland. I will endeavour to stick to the legislative proposal before us.

I have a question about the proposal for the broadcasting funding scheme to be administered by the BAI to provide a bursary grants scheme for professional journalists working in certain sound broadcasters at local or community level. Will the Minister give some consideration to broadening the scheme to include print journalism? Does he have a view on whether it should be expanded to include print journalism? As we all know, historically, many journalists cut their teeth in the back-street offices of local newspapers. There are many great journalists who come out of that stable and moved into the broadcasting or print journalism sphere. It would be a worthwhile proposal if it could be considered.

While the legislation is silent on the household charge, the Minister did make an announcement on it. However, he is telling us that it will be five years before it is introduced. For the life of me, I cannot understand why we have to wait for five years. I surmise that there may be political sensitivities surrounding the very idea of introducing a household charge based on experiences in the past with certain other proposals for charges. However, I do not think we should be afraid to move in that direction sooner than the Minister is proposing to do. If we are really serious about content creation, particularly from a cultural and indigenous point of view when we know that there is such creativity on this island, and if we know that we are not realising the full potential of the television licence fee and that it has a bearing on public service broadcasting, I do not understand why we cannot be more radical and imaginative in moving with greater haste and urgency. I do not understand why ensuring there is the requisite fund-

ing to support the creative content that is so vital and that sustains us could not be done in way less than five years. I share Deputy Dooley's point. I think the Minister would find agreement across the House on how we could reach that point, if the message of a household charge is articulated in the right way to the people such they understand, as citizens, what they get for their money, namely, greater content and home-grown and indigenous content, displacing some of the dross being imported by RTÉ, much of which can be watched on most other platforms. If we are not creating indigenous content, we are going down the slippery slope towards greater homogenisation. We badly need to ensure we protect and encourage home-grown content producers. It is self-evident that the content produced is of the highest order. It receives global recognition. We need to be braver in how we approach issues such as the household charge. I reiterate that the Minister would find favour across the House if there was dialogue with Opposition Members on how it could be achieved.

My last point is not pertinent to the legislation but relates to the recent announcement made by RTÉ on Lyric FM and the potential closure of the Cork studios. If RTÉ was looking to Members to advocate for it on the basis of flying kites of this nature, it was going about it in a very bad way. Suggesting, for instance, in such an announcement that Lyric FM or the station in Cork which is a major regional component of RTÉ's output be closed down was not the way to go if RTÉ was seeking to find friends in political circles. We all see it as the move that it was. If it was seeking to leverage from us, as politicians representing these areas, a degree of sympathy to approach the Government to increase its funding stream, or using us as leverage to increase its funding stream in order that it could go back to the Government for a greater share of the pot, I suggest to RTÉ that it was not the way to go. It needs to engage in dialogue a little more with local public representatives on its future plans. At the same time, if we do not have RTÉ, if we do not have a public service broadcasting model, or if it is not on a sound financial footing and not future-proofed because it cannot drive new content owing to a lack of revenue, five years is too far into the future for a household charge. As I said, there would be a willingness to engage on what broadcasting would look like in the future, and Members of this House would co-operate with the Government in that regard.

I want to ask the Minister about the EU's "Television Without Frontiers" directive. While I am asking the Minister to look into the crystal ball, it would be very useful to have the Minister's perspective on where the "Television Without Frontiers" directive stands if UK stations leave the EU and what arrangements, if any, would need to be put in place, particularly where UK channels are advertising within the Irish market. I do not know if that question is pertinent but it would be useful to have a perspective in regard to where stands the "Television Without Frontiers" directive in the event a no-deal Brexit. We have not heard of how the broadcasting component of Brexit will play out, given we consume so much content from the United Kingdom. It could be that it has no effect whatsoever but it would be useful to hear the Minister's perspective on that.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am happy to speak on the Bill, which has several key provisions, as follows: to enable the industry regulator, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, to impose and-or reduce the, and in some cases exempt from, payment of the broadcasting levy by certain broadcasters for new services; to provide for part-funding of the BAI from television licence receipts to a maximum of 50% of its funding, with the intention of reducing the existing broadcasting levy burden on all broadcasters; to allow the BAI to accrue a level of working capital to meet its operational requirements, which is a very interesting statement; to provide flexibility to the BAI in how it charges the broadcasting levy; and to introduce a new broadcast-

ing funding scheme, administered by the BAI, to provide a bursary grant scheme for professional journalists working in certain sound broadcasters at local or community level.

This last item is one I am most intrigued by and most inclined to support. This is as it should be. We have to inspire and promote creative young journalists and people in the colleges who study journalism, and we must have some kind of incentives for them to be able to sustain themselves and to enhance and promote what goes on in community life. It is all about community, as far as I am concerned. Community has been forgotten about by successive Governments and the institutions of the State. Everything has been removed from the communities but without those communities, we would be a much poorer place, in particular without the people who make those communities tick. They are not waiting for handouts from the State. They are the enablers and the enthusiasts, and they nurture and support all things local. It is not all about Dublin 4 and stopping at the M50, and there is a lot of Ireland and many good people beyond that. The Minister himself came to Cluain Meala, the vale of honey, for his bean chéile. Although it was a long time ago, he should know more about rural Ireland than others.

The last point was critical. I fully support the work of local and community radio as an important voice in our national debate. A hurricane is supposed to be coming in over us tonight. I welcome the new-found engagement of the national emergency group in warning people, which is very welcome, as they have the expertise and all the scientific measurements and information from Met Éireann advising them. Supposing it does arrive and it has catastrophic effects, who will be the conveyor of communications about the damage for local people? It will not be RTÉ or any national broadcaster; it will be community radio and local radio, in my case, Tipp FM, Tipp Mid West Radio and WLR across the border. They will be on the ground, providing the service. If Dublin gets hit hard, we will not get a look-in on the news, either in Tipperary or anywhere else, because it is all about Dublin. We have seen that time and time again. When the River Dodder flooded 30 years ago, it was banner headlines from morning to night. We could be washed away or and blown away in Tipperary and RTÉ would not even know about it.

I want to salute the retired Damien Tiernan and his camera crews. Damien Tiernan was a reporter who did sterling work over the years. He struggled and he fought, and the studio was closed and merged into Waterford Institute of Technology, and we put up with that as well. We now have Conor Kane, who has replaced him. Damien Tiernan found it harder and harder to get stories and input broadcast after he had gone out and diligently reported the news. He met the people and looked after them, and was embraced and engaged by the people. He filed stories and reports but they fell off the conveyor belt in RTÉ, for whatever reason. The local news is important to the people - ní neart go cur le chéile. The people of An Roinn, Caisleán Nua and Tiobraid Árann Theas are as important as the people of Dublin 4 and the Minister should never forget that. It is at his peril that he would forget it but he has forgotten it and the Government has forgotten it. They do not support the people in rural Ireland. We do not want that much support. We want to be left alone to live in freedom, with a modicum of free press, free reporting and impartial journalism, not the organs of State and public service broadcasters out there attacking and demonising the people of rural Ireland, and making a mockery and a skit of them. That is what has happened so many times.

We see this in the context of how media ownership in this country is organised and supported. To take the most recent incident, beef farmers were driven to distraction and the beef plan was set up because monopolies in the beef industry have been mushrooming, growing and expanding for the last 40 years, and the industry has been getting away with it while successive Governments stood idly by. This time, farmers were driven to distraction. It is not that they

wanted to be on pickets or wanted to upset workers in the factories but they wanted to expose this. I am still waiting for “RTÉ Investigates” to do a proper exposé on the price of a bullock or heifer when it goes into the factory, and what the farmer gets, what the factory gets and what the supermarket gets.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The Deputy did not want to hear what they said about greyhounds.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am getting side messages from a pirate station. Fianna Fáil had enough of a say and I do not know what Deputy Dooley is saying to me. They are cut from the same cloth as the Minister.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I said the Deputy did not want to hear what they said about the greyhounds. That was a fine programme.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** They are joined at the hip with confidence and supply. I would like to speak without interruption, if I can. The Deputy had plenty of time to talk.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Mattie McGrath should not invite interruptions.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am not inviting interruptions and there is nobody else interrupting me. I am pointing out that Deputy Micheál Martin has said he fully supports the broadcasting charge, so they both know that before they even change places, before confidence and supply goes this way or that way. Tweedledum or Tweedledee, they are all the one.

I certainly telephoned RTÉ a number of times to cover this and to talk to the women, the children, the husbands and the grandparents who were making their point outside the factory gates. No, it was not interested. It was said that Fran McNulty covers that. Fran McNulty got to Cahir one day - Cathair Dún Iascaigh - but it was not covered properly and I know why.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** It was on television every night and it was on radio all day, every day.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Can I continue without commentary?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There should be no comments from other Members.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Thank you. He is distracting me. If he wants to debate with me, I will debate with him any day but I am talking to the Minister about this legislation.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should speak through the Chair.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am speaking through the Chair. I respect the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, of course I do, but I am just saying, without interruption, if he does not mind, that we all know why that was not covered. It is the same with the national print media, which we are not talking about tonight because they are not included in the Bill.

He who pays the piper calls the tune, unfortunately. We open the Sunday newspapers and read the acres of ads for big businesses, whether Tesco, Dunnes, Aldi, Lidl or whatever you are having yourself and indeed the Marketing Institute of Ireland, MII. We have allowed these people to get too powerful and too close to political parties and the political parties are too close to them. We know that the story goes on and around and around. It is a case of, “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”.

As I said, it is timely that this legislation should come forward but, like Deputy Sherlock, I am a little distracted and confused as to why. Even though the Government had Deputy Micheál Martin supporting this new household charge, as I read in a statement, the Minister has not addressed it at all in this new Bill. He says it will take five years to implement. That is for one reason, which is that the Government with its confidence-and-supply arrangement has probably decided a date - any day soon - for the next general election and wants to get over the fact, even though Deputy Martin was in favour of it, as he is in favour of most other things the Government has done. He stands up here shadowboxing all right, saying he is not in favour of this and not in favour of that. We had that last week with the removal of our Garda headquarters in Tipperary. Deputy Cahill opposed it, and rightly so. He would because he is from Thurles. However, Deputy Martin said he was in favour of the policy, as was Deputy O'Callaghan, the justice spokesperson. We are playing a game here, a trick o' the loop, but our educated electorate see what is going on.

Going back to my local radio-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, listen-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am addressing the Chair.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy is having a conversation on the side with Deputy Dooley-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Only when he comments. I do not know what he is saying.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I was clearing my throat.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Even if Deputy Dooley coughs, Deputy McGrath thinks he is interrupting him. I ask him to continue.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I would say Deputy Dooley got the flu vaccine. He is all right. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle should not worry.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Let us act like adults and parliamentarians-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am trying to.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** -----and concentrate on the actual debate-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am trying to.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** -----which is on the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2019.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I appeal to the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, and he is always fair, to allow me-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That is my problem: I am too fair.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** -----to continue without interruption. I do not know. Comments are being made. Deputy Dooley is only four feet away from me. I want to continue.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Ar aghaidh leat.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Go raibh maith agat.

2 October 2019

We had the snowstorm last year and there were other storms. I salute Tipp FM. Trudy Waters is a Clare woman, so my colleague on the right might know her. She is now retired.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** She is outstanding.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** She is still working freelance. She did an excellent job reporting the news, the views and, above all, the feelings, hindrances, accessibility problems and food and service problems people had. They are the people - of the people, by the people. Tipp FM reports from 6 a.m. until 12 midnight. Then there is Tipp Mid West radio with Joe Pryce, Pat Murphy and so on and the many backroom staff. It now has a new head of news, Ms Angela Doyle Stuart, whom I wish well. She is from Carlow. They go out and look into communities and what is going on in them. They cover community events across a broad spectrum, whether *iománaíocht*, *cluichí peile*, *rinche nó amhránaíocht*. There is "Down Your Way with Eamon O'Dwyer" every week without fail in the *paróiste* of *Tiobraid Árann*, *thuaidh agus theas*. He listens to and gives exposure to the people in those areas, what they do, the culture they want to create and stimulate, how they have existed and an *stair freisin* - the history, as well as the culture and heritage. It is so important; if this was not done, we would lose these things. These stations do such tremendous work, and I want money ring-fenced for them from the licence fee or whatever this legislation provides for. I do not see enough of it. There are options here to support those local and regional stations. They come up here once a year, we all have a big hoo-hah, we meet them in the audiovisual room, we listen to them and we have a photo shoot. They were here only a few weeks ago. However, we need to support them and put our money where our mouth is. They are the lifeblood of the community. *Ní neart go cur le chéile*. They are the people who listen and give a voice to those people out there in the communities, the villages, the townlands, up in the mountains and down in the lowlands, and when there are flooding crises.

Last week in my town of Cluain Meala, we had a march about mental health. Tipp Mid West were the only people who covered it. RTÉ was not interested in the mental health problems in Tipperary or in covering them - not at all. It has more - I will not use the word "sexy", but it has different things it wants to produce and talk about. I am calling out RTÉ tonight - and Deputy Bruton is the Minister on watch - for its failures and failings and for ending up in such debt problems. Many good people worked in RTÉ. I have mentioned Damien Tiernan and Conor Kane and I also wish to mention Martina Fitzgerald, who was here with us for years and went so quickly from our sights. I wish her well, wherever she is. There are programmes on RTÉ that do nothing but make a mockery of rural Ireland from morning to night. We have journalists there on six-figure sums and more who only treat with disdain the people of rural Ireland. When Deputies Danny and Michael Healy-Rae, Michael Collins, I and others speak here, they are only *ag gáire* at us - laughing at us, mocking us. However, I remind the Minister and RTÉ, if its reporters are watching, that we are elected by the people of our constituencies for the time being, and only the time being, because we must face election. Whether or not we are returned, we will accept the voice of the ballot box. RTÉ has disdain for the people of rural Ireland and demonises them. It is doing so at the moment in the context of coursing and greyhound racing. It did it last week with the beef industry. However, they would have big long faces and noses and *ocras* on them if they did not have beef to eat or if there was no steak on the menu. Then there might be a different story.

RTÉ is shortsighted and neglectful of people in rural Ireland. All the people of rural Ireland want is to be left alone, to do what we want to do and to express our feelings, whether in religion - as Christians - or in the Gaelic language as *Gaeilgeoirs*, *agus rinche*, *céilithe*, *set*, *seanscéalta agus rudaí mar sin*. That is all we want to do, not to be demonised by people who are on savage

pay. Some of them went off to other stations abroad and were encouraged back with incomes of more than €500,000 and inducements and so on. As other Deputies said, they are then on C2s that allow them to be self-employed to evade taxes. This all needs to be exposed. Why will RTÉ not come out and expose what is going on in big business, the cartels and the beef industry? It should expose that. I am calling now on the record of this House, as I have done already, for RTÉ to come out and do a proper “RTÉ Investigates” programme on this. It has done some tremendous “RTÉ Investigates” programme, and I salute it on that. The most recent one concerned the carry-on on the Border around Cavan with the employees in the former Quinn industries. That is savagery and nothing else, and I salute RTÉ on what it did in exposing that and the many other exposés it has done.

I criticise RTÉ, however, on the exposé it did on the greyhound industry. It did not have to go back 16 years to an old Chinese film to come up with a contorted, contrived attack on the industry. That is what it was: a contrived and totally biased attack on a sporting industry. If there are some who abuse dogs, and there is a minority, I have no truck with them, I do not support them, and it is a scandal. I do not believe, however, that any dogs from Ireland were ever put into boiling water here. It was a disgusting programme. The footage was ten or 12 years old. Then we find out that researchers on the programme are related to other people. That is not fair journalism. That is an attack on rural Ireland and the pride we have in greyhound racing. There are thousands of jobs in the industry and the spin-off industries. The Minister should remember that every man, woman, boy or girl who has a dog must have a kennel, a trailer, a box, a veterinarian, tackle and every other kind of treatment. They love their animals and want to be able to pursue their sports. We do not need the national broadcaster to do a sabotage job, a hit job, on them at the behest of a small minority, who are faceless in the main, and many of whom are not even from this country. They have an issue with the barbarity of greyhounds following a dummy hare around a track. My goodness, it is so sad, and there being so many other issues, such as the homeless in Dublin and the figures that came out today for homeless children. An exposé needs to be done on that.

RTÉ must be held to account if it produces untruths, but how can it be tackled? I myself was set up on “Prime Time” one night. I came up to meet the Minister, Deputy Ross, and Conor Faughnan and then found out RTÉ had some other person on who made an uninterrupted attack on me because of my views on rural Ireland. The way in which RTÉ behaved regarding the repeal of the eighth amendment was nothing short of scurrilous, biased and disgusting. Honest people who had a certain view and are entitled to hold that view in a democracy were demonised, undermined and caricatured in a disgraceful way by RTÉ. It was nothing short of disgraceful. Morning to night we had “repeal the eighth” on every other programme. We were talking about balance. Where was the balance? There was no balance whatsoever, only its agenda. It is the liberal agenda that seeks change, with funding from George Soros from abroad and attacks on anything Christian. As regards mentioning the word “Christian”, we saw what happened recently in a County Galway town when one of our colleagues mentioned the word “Christian”. He was demonised as if he had come from outer space. What is wrong with our Christian values? They stood us well over the decades and now they are demonised by the national broadcaster.

We must have fair play. We need a Minister, and I do not expect it of this Minister, to hold it accountable for giving fair play to the ordinary people of Ireland who pay their way and pay their taxes. Certainly, go after the spongers who will not pay for their licences, but do not threaten every household with a tax that the Government cannot collect. I never advocated that

people should not pay for water, but I would advocate that people not pay the RTÉ licence fee while the station is so distorted and so disdainful of anything to do with Christians. It will not investigate the persecution of Christians in the Middle East by ISIS, as well as the persecution of minority Muslim religions and other sects. There must be balance, not wall-to-wall television attacking the respectable people of rural Ireland or rural pursuits and, indeed, anything that is bad about it.

I seek support for local radio stations. They are answerable and accountable to the people. They cover the people and have nurtured many good journalists. They have supported many politicians and other groups and let them have freedom of expression. We are supposed to be a democracy, and not one that is pulled and dragged aside by the moguls in the media industry and the press, the Tescos and all the other moguls, and to hell with the ordinary people who pay the piper. It is time to have meaningful legislation, respect for ordinary citizens and to give power back to the people.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I do not have to apologise to Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. I could not interrupt the leader of his group. It is a matter for yourselves to decide.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Can I speak now?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You cannot. I must call Deputy Connolly.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** He can come back in.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Later on, Deputy, perhaps next week or next month.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I came too soon.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is just an internal matter.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** That can be a problem, Deputy.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We have 20 minute slots. Deputy Michael Collins and I had a 20 minute slot each.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Yes, but it will be at a later stage. I call Deputy Connolly.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Public service broadcasting is an essential ingredient of a functioning democracy and we should do anything we can to support it. That said, this Bill is quite specific. I wish to raise two issues. One relates to the Irish language and the other relates to community radio. Deputy Dooley already referred to the matter regarding community radio stations. I am not sure why the Broadcasting Authority has been left with discretion regarding the imposition of a levy on a community radio station. More importantly, a community radio station with an income of over €250,000 will be subject to the levy. As was pointed out, that income comes from the State, so one arm of the State is giving the money and another arm is imposing a levy. It does not make sense. I would appreciate if the Minister would examine that.

The second matter relates to the Broadcasting Act 2009, which the Minister is amending in certain respects. There is no mention of the Irish language. I am not sure if the Minister gave consideration to that or if there is still time to do it. I refer the Minister to the “Tuarascáil ar na Dúshláin a Bhaineann le Craoltóireacht na Gaeilge”. Sin tuarascáil a d’fhoilsigh muid i mBealtaine 2019, cúpla mí ó shin. It deals with the challenges facing broadcasting in Ireland.

The Committee on the Irish Language, the Gaeltacht and the Islands produced the report last May and made a number of recommendations, two of which are basic, maidir le reachtaíocht agus rialú:

1. Go dtreiseofaí le práinn na míreanna faoin nGaeilge san Acht Craolacháin 2009 chun cur ar chumas Údarás Craolacháin na hÉireann ... polasaithe Gaeilge gníomhacha a fhorbairt i bpáirt le craoltóirí an Stáit.

2. Go n-aithneofaí ‘Craoltóireacht na Gaeilge’ mar phríomhdhualgais in aon sainmhíniú nua de ‘craoltóireacht sheirbhísí poiblí’ in aon reachtaíocht chumarsáide leasaithe nó nuadhréachtaithe.

To go back to that in English, we asked that the Broadcasting Act 2009 be amended. A number of specific provisions in the Act are not strong enough with regard to when a commercial radio station is granted a licence. There is an obligation in respect of the Irish language but it is extremely weak, as is the monitoring of it. Having listened to a number of presentations to the committee, we asked that it be examined with a view to increasing the power of the Broadcasting Authority, in the first place, and increasing the duty on the radio stations to comply with the obligation to broadcast in Irish.

That arose from a number of presentations, but I refer the Minister to one in particular. It is the research from Dr. John Walsh, University College Galway, and Dr. Rosemary Day, *Co-láiste Mhuire Gan Smál, Ollscoil Luimnigh*. The research is very interesting. They pointed out that in 30 of years of broadcasting by local radio stations no research had been carried out on whether they were complying with their duty, however weak it is, under the 2009 Act. They appeared before the committee twice. In their research they contacted 59 stations. Some 53 responded, which was quite a good response. The 53 that responded said, in a collaborative way, that they were not broadcasting, or broadcasting very little, in Irish and gave their reasons. The two researchers went back to them a second time and then appeared before the committee.

The findings were that the number of weekly hours broadcast in Irish or bilingually is very low compared to the stations’ overall outputs. The average weekly output is 3.23 hours, including repeats. For the most part, programmes in Irish are broadcast outside peak hours, which is after 7 p.m., overnight or early on Sunday morning. Of the commercial stations, by far the highest weekly Irish language output is from youth stations such as iRadio. They have a much higher output, but the majority of these hours are broadcast overnight when listenership is negligible. Removing iRadio, which is the youth radio, would decrease the average output to less than two hours per week per station. The next highest output of any station is on the Spin youth station. Six hours on both SpinSouthWest and the 103.8 stations are 3.6% of their output. I could give more figures, but the message from this research, interestingly, is that the stations directed to the youth had a higher content of Irish programmes and the other stations had minimal content or nothing.

The research revealed that four commercial stations - Galway Bay FM, which has since improved, KCLR FM, MidWest Radio and Today FM - and one community station broadcast no Irish in their schedules. Four commercial radio stations have no dedicated Irish language or bilingual programme and only broadcast Irish language or bilingual inserts three or four times a week. It is quite astounding with regard to Gaeltacht communities. Raidió na Gaeltachta is not involved as the research only deals with commercial and community radio stations. There are Gaeltacht districts in seven counties and they are listed in the research. None of the local

Cork stations broadcasts full programmes in Irish. It also deals with Kerry and Galway. Despite a large Gaeltacht area in Galway, no Irish language material is broadcast on the local radio station, although it has improved minimally since then. MidWest Radio in Mayo broadcasts nothing in Irish although there are Gaeltacht areas in its area. Highland Radio in Donegal has 3.37 hours per week.

The absence of Irish language programming in local stations is significant due to their high listenership within their franchise area, as successive pieces of research have shown.

There is a serious problem here in the shape of the weakness of the Broadcasting Act 2009. The conclusions are that, 30 years after the legislation for independent radio in Ireland, the Irish language has only a marginal role on radio stations other than those broadcasting in Irish. This is in spite of the statutory provisions under the 2009 Act regarding Irish in the licensing process that obliges all stations to include it in their programming. However, with a small number of exceptions, stations broadcast only minimal amounts of Irish, almost invariably outside of peak hours. The legislation is weak and imprecise regarding the Irish language. A specific section states that the contracts awards committee under the broadcasting authority is obliged only to have regard to Irish when making a decision on awarding a licence. What that means is not even spelt out.

There are many other recommendations relating to the broadcasting authority. A specific recommendation for Government was chun an reachtaíocht a threisiú, that is, to strengthen the 2009 Act. I hope the Minister will look at it as it is very specific and it is not a huge amount of work. It suggests looking at the Broadcasting Act in two or three sections to strengthen the ability of the broadcasting authority to insist on a certain level of Irish programmes being broadcast on commercial and community radio stations. It is difficult for me to stand here mar Theachta Dála as cathair dhátheangach atá ar thairseach na Gaeltachta is mó sa tír agus a bheith ar an eolas anois, 30 bliain tar éis na stáisiúin a theacht ar an aer, nach bhfuil Gaeilge ar bith ar fhorhmór na stáisiúin raidió.

I hope the Government will consider my suggestions. If it does not do so, I will be forced to bring in amendments. I would prefer to work with the Minister, given our obligations under the Constitution relating to the Irish language and the fact that this legislation could be suitable with the addition of just a few sections.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** This Bill focuses on a number of things. It would enable the broadcasting authority to impose, reduce, and in some cases eliminate or exempt the payment of the broadcasting levy by certain broadcasters. I am worried because we do not know what charge will be imposed. It refers to providing flexibility to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland in dealing with the application of the broadcasting levy and introducing a new broadcasting funding scheme administered by the authority. It is very broad and we are not sure what it will constitute or how it will be meted out to the people who will be asked to pay. I am repeating what has been said to me all around my constituency. People are very dissatisfied with what RTÉ 1 and RTÉ 2 are producing for the fee they have to pay. TG4 appears to be the only station that satisfies a lot of people's requirements. People can watch matches and see the Fleadh Cheoil and other things of interest to people in rural Ireland. Current affairs and news on RTÉ 1 and RTÉ 2 are very good but many of the lighter programmes are repetitive and viewers are sick of them, having seen them hundreds of times, so they turn off the television.

I am worried how the local radio stations in Kerry and around the country will fare under the

new levies. They have to be supported because if it were not for Radio Kerry in the morning, people would not know if their neighbours were dead. The Road Traffic Act was imposed here by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, and his supporters, as well as by those who abstained. Many people are isolated in their homes and cannot even go to the pub for one pint so they stay at home. Everyone listens to Radio Kerry attentively to see who is on the list of people who pass away. People like to go to funerals but they will miss these too, and there is no going to the creamery now and there are no local shops. Most of the post offices are closed as well as the Garda stations, and there is no interaction in rural Ireland any more.

Radio Kerry has a great current affairs programme from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. five days per week, with Treasa and Jerry who keep abreast of everything that happens locally and nationally. The service is invaluable. We have entertainment programmes such as Dermot Moriarty's country music show and there is a fairly full schedule from early in the morning to late at night, which provides entertainment for people of all ages. We have Danny O'Mahony with Irish music. It has been a revelation since its inception. We had a great sports commentator, Weeshie Fogarty, who was known countywide, nationally and internationally. He was a famous man who did great work for Kerry and the GAA and all sports in the country. He will be remembered forever even though he has gone now. We have new people like Timmy Moynihan, Ambrose O'Donovan and Billy O'Shea, who are doing great work in the GAA. If not for that great radio station, many people would be very lonely in rural parts of Kerry. It is getting better and better and deserves credit and any support that we can give it. It is not getting money from licences, as I understand it, but it needs support because it is in competition with RTÉ. Even then, it is keeping the flag flying in Kerry and is doing a great job which we are all very proud of. I am concerned that this Bill is like writing a blank cheque for this regulator. My experience of regulators has not been good. Any of the regulators we know of that were supposed to do a job did not do it right. In one case, they left the country to go down the Swanee with what happened with financial institutions in our country.

This Bill is very broad. I cannot see that I can support this Bill until we get clarification and detail as to what people will be asked to pay. Will it be an addendum to the current television licence? Will it be instead of the television licence? That is what we were told for a while. We do not know what the charge will be. As I said already, people have a problem with what they are paying for at present. People pay when they are getting value for money but if they are not getting value for money, they are slow to pay. People I represent tell me that a good deal of what is shown on RTÉ at present is not up to much. They are not happy and there is not enough modern, current content on it which would interest most people. The current affairs and the news are very good and have to be supported. We thank it for the great job it is doing on those.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** What about "The Late Late Show"? The Healy-Raes are regulars on that. The Deputy has to thank it too.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I did not rule out everyone.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** He does not have to speak for his brother.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Ryan Tubridy is a good operator, as was Gay Byrne before him. If it was not a good programme, it would not have lasted for this long. It has survived the test of time and I have no doubt that it will carry on for a long time to come.

The greyhound programme that depicted the greyhound industry in such a bad light was not

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fair on people who love their dogs, would do nothing wrong to their dogs and have fortunes invested in their dogs. I met a man the other day who said he had €22,500 invested in his dogs. They would not have those dogs if they were going to hurt them or did not feel-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have to interrupt Deputy Healy-Rae going round the track and ask him to-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Just one second. The programme stated that more than 6,000 greyhounds were unaccounted for, that they had been put down and were treated badly. I can assure the House that I met one dog that was ten years old and one would not know that he was not a six month old pup.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy will have an opportunity to speak again the next time the Bill is debated.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.15 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 3 October 2019.