



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 5 Márta 2020*

*Thursday, 5 March 2020*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## **Visit of Republic of North Macedonia Delegation**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before proceeding with our formal business, I wish on my own behalf and on behalf of the Members to extend a céad míle fáilte, a most sincere welcome, to Her Excellency Ms Aleksandra Miovska, ambassador of the Republic of North Macedonia, along with senior officials. They are very welcome to Leinster House. I hope they find their visit useful and to our mutual benefit.

## **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**Deputy Peter Burke:** In relation to today's business it is proposed that:

(1) Notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, the only business to be taken today shall be as set out in the first revised report of the Business Committee, dated 3 March 2020, and there shall be no questions on promised legislation;

(2) The Dáil shall sit later than 8.03 p.m. and shall adjourn if there are no further speakers offering on statements on coronavirus, Covid-19, or at 8.30 p.m., whichever is the earlier;

(3) No. 4, motion re establishment of Standing Order 131 select committee, and No. 5, motion re Standing Orders 30, 100, 118A, 119, 120, 173, 178 and 219 and membership of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform, shall be taken without debate and any division demanded thereon shall be taken immediately;

(4) No. 6, statements post European Council meeting of 20 to 21 February, pursuant to Standing Order 124, shall conclude within 3 hours 45 minutes, unless previously concluded. Statements shall be confined to two rounds, a questions and answer session and a wrap-up by the Minister. The opening round of statements of a Minister or Minister of State and the

main spokespersons for parties and groups, or a member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each; the second round of statements for a Minister or Minister of State and parties and groups shall not exceed ten minutes each; a Minister or Minister of State shall take questions for a period not exceeding 20 minutes, with a five-minute response by a Minister or Minister of State, and all Members may share time;

(5) No. 7, statements on coronavirus, Covid-19, shall adjourn if there are no further speakers offering or at 8.30 p.m., whichever is the earlier. The opening statements of a Minister or Minister of State shall not to exceed 20 minutes and the statements of the main spokespersons of parties and groups, or a Member nominated in their stead, shall not exceed ten minutes each, with five minutes for all other Members and a five-minute response from a Minister or Minister of State. All Members may share time;

(6) The Dáil on its rising shall adjourn until 2 p.m. on Thursday, 19 March 2020.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There is one proposal to put to the House. These matters have been unanimously agreed earlier today by the Business Committee.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I am aware of the discussions at the committee earlier today. I wrote to the Ceann Comhairle in respect of the Dáil establishing an all-party committee on the Covid-19 virus. I am strongly of the view that this is necessary, particularly if the Dáil is not going to sit for another two weeks. We are in the unusual situation of being in an interregnum period where, by convention, significant policy decisions are not taken by a Government. I think it is a requirement, if there are to be significant policy decisions which may well be necessitated by the unfolding situation regarding the virus, that there would be political underpinning of the legitimacy of those decisions. For that reason, although I welcome the fact that there will be statements, I am of the view that the Dáil should consider establishing an all-party committee to discuss as well as agree any future policy decisions that might be required to combat the virus.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I want to speak in support of the principle that this House should meet in whatever form. Doing so may be complex, technical or present difficulties, but in light of the scale of possible responses that we may have to resort to, and, in particular, without a new Government in place, democratic engagement is needed in order to assist the administrative system in whatever needs to be done. That may be difficult and complex in terms of working out the mechanism involved but I absolutely agree with the principle Deputy Howlin has set out.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** I also support that principle for a number of reasons. First, I acknowledge that public health officials are working under incredible strain and stress and are flat out in terms of dealing with all of the implications of a public health crisis of this kind, and a potential pandemic. It would be useful if a mechanism could be found within the existing technical or constitutional framework to have an Oireachtas committee, for a number of reasons. The psychology of a public health scare is at times as important as the scare itself. We have spoken to Deputies on our side in our parliamentary party who have already experienced cases in their constituencies. Basically, the phone explodes. That is how one Deputy articulated it. There is much concern and there are many queries for public representatives. If coherence is to emerge from the political system, to help the Government and public health officials, in particular, it would make sense to have a mechanism that would allow Deputies and other Members of the Oireachtas to engage, keep people making decisions and have an exchange of views that would be helpful rather than undermine the current efforts.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before I call the other three other Deputies who are offering to contribute, I wish to help with the discussion. Deputy Howlin's proposal was considered seriously this morning. There was a view that the officials leading this need to devote their entire attention to leading the campaign. There was a very strong view that should the Government require the moral authority of this Dáil to embark on any particular action, the Dáil would respond immediately to support it in whatever initiative is envisaged. I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** We need to be careful in the mechanism we choose for the purposes the Deputies have set out. I share the view of the Business Committee that all the time, attention and resources of those at the front line of this emergency need to be spent on keeping the public safe. That said, we have a caretaker Government. It is absolutely essential that those of us on the other benches not be left as an afterthought when policy decisions are being made. For our part, we want absolute assurance that everything that needs to be done is being done to ensure capacity, including in terms of intensive care, the containment phase isolation units and the discharging of well people from hospital. In this regard, we should consider home help and the gross shortfall in home help hours. In other words, we want to have access to information. We also want to influence, in an appropriate and entirely constitutional way, the very big decisions that will be made on this matter. I am not convinced that an Oireachtas committee is the best vehicle for that but I am aware that the current arrangement is absolutely deficient, whereby we are hearing about most grave matters of serious public importance after they appear in the media. That needs to be fixed. We can find a mechanism other than a formal committee to do this but it needs to be done speedily.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am speaking on behalf of the Rural Independent Group. We had a discussion on this matter this morning. As the Ceann Comhairle said, we need a response and a vehicle to be able to respond. That vehicle is here. It is about time we got on with it and formed a Government, without having a period of flux without any real Government. We have a Government but its members are only operating in an acting capacity. We need to focus minds because this is a serious issue.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** As the Ceann Comhairle pointed out, there was a very detailed discussion of this proposal at the Business Committee meeting today. A unanimous decision was taken that it would not be in the interest of dealing with it to set up an Oireachtas committee. The main thinking behind that was based on the acceptance of the view that it would not be good to absorb significant amounts of the time of senior public health officials by having them come in here to meetings of a committee and that what we need are good, reliable and timely advice and briefings on the situation as it is emerging and changing from day to day. A briefing was arranged through the Minister for Health at 12 noon today for all party health spokespersons. It was a very worthwhile session. There were senior officials present. They made themselves available to answer detailed questions and clarify information already in the media. Having contacted the Minister for Health, I understand there is a commitment to provide briefings as often as is necessary. I welcome the establishment of a cross-departmental group under the Taoiseach's office. It has been suggested that briefings be provided to other parties after each meeting of that group. I think that is the sensible and best way forward. We should adhere to the decision of the Business Committee from earlier today. In the event of emergency legislation or the endorsement of this House for any proposal being required at any point, I have no doubt that all Members will make themselves available to return here at short notice.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Kelly is offering but I am sorry I cannot take a contribution from him. This time is only for party leaders and the Deputy is not, at this point, the leader of

the Labour Party.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach. The same rule applies to Deputy Ó Ríordáin.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Give the Deputy a trial run.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I also thank the Deputies for their suggestions and measured responses. This is a matter no one will want to politicise in the weeks and months ahead and it may well go on for many months. The Business Committee made a wise decision in not advocating for a full Oireachtas committee at this stage. We have a relatively small number of very competent and hard-working health officials, including the Chief Medical Officer and his team, some people in the HSE and some other senior public health officials. While this issue has become very topical in the last week or two, these officials have been working flat out on this issue since January. Many of them have not even taken a weekend off since then. We need them to be able to focus on their jobs and also get some rest. We also need to ensure they do not spend all their time being held to account instead of doing their job. I know we have to get that balance right and there has to be a balance.

Regarding what is being done, there have been, and there will continue to be, briefings for party spokespersons on health. Indeed, there was one today. There will also be a weekly briefing for all Members in the audiovisual room. This will be for people who get constituency queries and want a mechanism to funnel those queries to people who can answer them. They are not always politicians; in fact, they are usually not. The weekly briefing in the audiovisual room will, therefore, be to assist Members and their staff with such queries.

The Government took a decision this week to establish a Cabinet sub-committee that will meet for the first time on Monday, under my chairmanship. The senior officials' group behind that has already met twice. A stakeholders' group has also been established so that we can keep in touch with and inform employers, unions, civil society and others in advance of decisions being announced. That group has already met and will meet again. In addition, it has been signalled to the HSE - I spoke to the CEO of the HSE today - that necessary resources, over and above its budget for this year, will be provided to allow it to take whatever actions are necessary to contain Covid-19 in Ireland. For example, the decision was taken today to open any closed intensive care unit, ICU, beds. As it happens, no patient has yet needed an ICU bed, but it is still a good precaution to prepare for that eventuality and to make more isolation facilities available, as needed. The Cabinet sub-committee has been set up and the stakeholders' group has already met. The HSE has been given the green light to use additional resources, staff and financial, as needed so that we are able to contain Covid-19 for as long as we can.

It is also worth reminding the House that under the Constitution, the Government continues until a new one is elected. The terms "caretaker" and "acting" are not used in the Constitution. The Government continues until a new Government is elected to replace it and it continues to have full executive authority. We are mindful, however, that it is a political convention that no major new policy decisions, public appointments or financial allocations will be made without consulting the Opposition parties. That will be done. I am happy to give exactly that assurance. It may be necessary to come to this House to seek legislative changes. We will be able to clarify that on Monday. We have strong legislation regarding public health and we do not believe, at this stage, that it needs to be enhanced. We may need to enhance legislation on employment

and social protections so that people are not disincentivised if they are asked to self-isolate. We will have clarity on that, most likely on Monday after the Cabinet sub-committee meets. It is possible for the House to legislate before a new Government is elected if we have consensus on legislation and that is the basis on which we will operate.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I apologise to Deputy Boyd Barrett whom I did not see. He can make a brief contribution, if he wishes.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I agree with the decision for the reasons outlined. Public health officials need to concentrate on addressing the crisis rather than spending unnecessary time at committee meetings. As I said at the Business Committee today, I welcome the Taoiseach's comments about briefings. There also needs to be provision, however, for parties, groups and whatever to put forward proposals in the Dáil that will be facilitated if it becomes necessary. For example, I believe there should be no two-tier system operating in the health service if we are trying to identify extra capacity such as intensive care unit, ICU, capacity, bed capacity or isolation units. The two-tier system simply should not operate. Private hospital capacity, which might be useful in addressing this crisis or for preparing for it, should be immediately made available. Any financial or other obstacles which might prevent individuals from taking the advice given by health professionals in terms of self-isolation or any other matter must be removed immediately. There should be no impediment to people doing what the HSE and public health officials are telling them to do. If we need motions or legislation passed in the Dáil, the Government needs to be open to proposals from all sides of the House and facilitate such proposals in the Dáil next week.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I welcome the fact a Cabinet sub-committee has been set up and that we are not forming another committee. However, I want to put this matter in context. Most Members are in receipt of a letter from 4 March from Fórsa on capacity. It stated:

The scale of the closure orders in relation to primary care is a significant shock to the overall health system in the west. It is unprecedented and I have not witnessed that scale of service closure in my two decades working as a trade union official... More patients will end up in hospital for longer because they cannot be discharged or fully avail of...services.

I will not read out the two pages of the letter in the interests of brevity. However, it clearly points out that we have a current crisis and that there are major closures planned in primary care. We are talking about capacity concerning this virus. We need to get real and put it in perspective. There is a crisis as is.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the proposal for dealing with today's business agreed to? Agreed.

### **Establishment of Standing Order 131 Select Committee: Motion**

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders—

(1) the Whips and other nominees shall appoint sixteen members to the Select Committee standing established under Standing Order 131 (which shall be called the Stand-

ing Order 131 Select Committee);

(2) a Minister or Minister of State shall announce the names of the members appointed under paragraph (1) for the information of the Dáil on the first sitting day of the Dáil following their appointment;

(3) Standing Order 104(2) will not apply in the case of this Committee, which shall not be subject to the d'Hondt system for the allocation of Chairman posts;

(4) the Select Committee shall meet where necessary to perform the following functions:

(a) to consider the potential requirement for a reasoned opinion that a draft legislative act does not comply with the principle of subsidiarity as provided for in paragraph (1) of Standing Order 133;

(b) to consider such notifications under paragraph (1)(a) and (b) of Standing Order 134 as may be referred to it by Dáil Éireann;

(c) to consider potential infringements of the principle of subsidiarity as provided for in paragraph (1) of Standing Order 135; and

(d) to consider other draft legislative acts which it deems appropriate.

(5) the Select Committee shall have the powers defined in—

(a) Standing Order 96 (1), (2), (4), (5), (6), (7), (14) and (15); and

(b) Standing Orders 133, 134 and 135.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Standing Orders 30, 100, 118A, 119, 120, 173, 178 and 219, and membership of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Motion**

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** I move:

That—

(1) the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business are amended with immediate effect—

(a) by the adoption of the following new Standing Order:

‘118A. (1) There shall stand established, following the reassembly of the Dáil subsequent to a General Election, a Committee, which shall be called the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform (hereinafter referred to in this Standing Order as “the Committee”).

(2) The functions of the Committee shall be to—

(a) consider matters of procedure generally, including procedure in Standing, Select or Special Committees, and make such recommendations on amendments to Standing Orders as it considers necessary and appropriate, and

(b) consider and make recommendations on the establishment of new Standing, Select or Special Committees.

(3) The Committee shall have the following powers:

(a) power to appoint sub-Committees as defined in Standing Order 96(4);

(b) power to engage consultants as defined in Standing Order 96(14);

(c) power to travel as defined in Standing Order 96(15) (other than as defined in subparagraph (a) thereof);

(d) power to print and publish reports and to authorise sub-Committees to report directly to the Dáil as defined in Standing Order 100(1).

(4) The Committee shall consist of the Ceann Comhairle, who *ex officio* shall be Chairman, and who shall have only one vote, and seventeen other members; and eight shall constitute a quorum. In the unavoidable absence of the Ceann Comhairle, the Leas-Ceann Comhairle may act as Chairman. The Committee shall be constituted so as to be impartially representative of the Dáil.

(5) In the absence of a member nominated to serve on the Committee, a substitute may be nominated to take part in the proceedings and shall be entitled to vote in the absent member's stead and to move motions and amendments in his or her own name.

(6) The Committee is a continuation in being of the sub-Committee which, under the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business, was previously titled the sub-Committee on Dáil Reform.';

and

(b) by the following consequential amendments:

(i) in Standing Order 30, in paragraph (1), by the substitution of 'Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform' for 'sub-Committee on Dáil Reform';

(ii) in Standing Order 100, in paragraphs (3) and (6), by the substitution of 'Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform' for 'Committee on Procedure';

(iii) in Standing Order 120, in paragraph (7), by the substitution of 'Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform' for 'sub-Committee on Dáil Reform';

(iv) in Standing Order 173, in paragraph (1), by the substitution of 'Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform' for 'sub-Committee on Dáil Reform';

(v) in Standing Order 178, in paragraph (1), by the substitution of 'Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform' for 'sub-Committee on Dáil Reform'; and

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(vi) in Standing Order 219, in paragraph (3), by the substitution of ‘Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform’ for ‘sub-Committee on Dáil Reform’ wherever it occurs;

and

(2) notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders and until further notice in the 33rd Dáil—

(a) the parties and groups shall appoint sixteen members to the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform standing established under Standing Order 118A (‘the Committee’), as follows:

(i) three members each appointed by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and Sinn Féin, and

(ii) one member each appointed by the Green Party, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Solidarity-People Before Profit, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group,

(b) the Ceann Comhairle shall announce the names of the members appointed under paragraph (a) for the information of the Dáil on the first sitting day of the Dáil following their appointment; and seven members of the Committee shall constitute a quorum; and

(c) Standing Order 119 is hereby amended by the deletion of paragraph (3).

Question put and agreed to.

### **European Council Meeting: Statements**

**The Taoiseach:** I attended the special meeting of the European Council held in Brussels on Thursday, 20 and Friday, 21 February, the first meeting of EU leaders this year. The meeting was convened by President of the European Council, Charles Michel, following our request at the December European Council for him to take forward negotiations on the post-2020 multi-annual financial framework, MFF. When we last met in December, the MFF was discussed but as part of a longer agenda. This included climate action - we endorsed the objective of a climate-neutral EU by 2050 - and, of course, Brexit.

Following our request, the European Council President, Charles Michel, presented a revised budgetary proposal or negotiating box on 14 February.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Can we have order, please?

**The Taoiseach:** This proposal was informed by a series of bilateral meetings he held with leaders in the preceding weeks. I discussed Irish interests and concerns with him on 12 February. It also built on extensive consultations at official level.

As the House will be aware, the Commission published its proposal for the next MFF in

May 2018. This proposed an overall level of 1.11% EU 27 GNI. Sectoral proposals covering 37 EU funding programmes were also presented by the Commission.

Negotiations intensified in the latter half of last year under the Finnish Presidency. These discussions revealed marked differences between member states. Some considered the level of spending proposed by the Commission as too high, including a group strongly of the view that spending should be kept to no more than 1% GNI. Others believed that continuing to support existing successful programmes, while also equipping ourselves to meet new challenges, required a higher ceiling and a bigger budget. The European Parliament, which must give its consent to the new budget, shares the view that a larger budget is required.

For our part, the Government has always stated that we are open to increased contributions, once existing policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, are properly resourced and added European value is demonstrated.

The Finnish Presidency proposal ahead of the December Council set out a ceiling of 1.07% GNI. In his revised negotiating box, President Michel proposed 1.074% EU GNI, or some €1.095 trillion.

As Deputies will appreciate, these negotiations are broad and cover many areas of EU policy. Each member state has its own particular areas of interest and priorities. As with all budget discussions, especially those involving 27 member states, it takes time and effort to bring positions closer together, and to find a compromise on which everyone agrees.

The negotiating box sets out proposed funding across seven major headings. These include the Single Market, innovation and digital; cohesion and values; natural resources and environment, including CAP; and neighbourhood and the world.

Reflecting the importance of tackling climate change the budget aims to mainstream climate action and to achieve an overall target of at least 25% of expenditure having a climate focus. A new just transition fund is proposed to deal with the social and economic consequences of far-reaching climate action and achieving climate neutrality by 2050. This fund will be open to all member states and I welcome the inclusion of the Irish midlands and other peatlands within its scope.

President Michel also aims to increase the capital available to the European Investment Bank to mobilise up to €500 billion of additional investment for climate change, green energy and other actions. There is also a strong PEACE PLUS allocation which will deliver a significant and much-needed cross-border programme.

While the latest proposal shows an increase for CAP compared with the original Commission proposal, it does not go far enough. I raised this point with President Michel when I met him in Brussels. In this meeting, I set out Ireland's well-established position on the need to protect CAP as an important, long-standing and well-functioning policy, and one of vital assistance to our rural communities, the rural economy and farming families.

I also set out the many challenges facing our farming sector, including Brexit and pressures and prices in the beef sector. I expressed my strong view that we cannot ask farmers to do more on climate, sustainability, animal welfare and food security while accepting less funding at the same time. I was unambiguous that this position has widespread support in Ireland across all parties.

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For his part, President Michel has on many occasions expressed the view that as a result of the departure of the United Kingdom, a significant net contributor to the budget, there is a gap in EU funding that needs to be filled. As a result, member states can expect to be contributing more while receiving less. Reaching agreement on such a proposition was always going to be a very difficult task and so it proved. Those who pay most into the budget have concerns about the overall size of the budget, with others sharing our concerns about possible funding cuts to priority programmes.

Due to rapid economic growth our annual contributions have grown significantly in recent years. The Department of Finance estimates that our gross annual contribution will increase further in the years ahead. Our economic success cannot be decoupled from our membership of the EU. As a large recipient of EU funding over many years, we got a leg up when we needed it most. As a small trading nation on the periphery of Europe, our economy has also benefited greatly as a full and committed member of the Single Market, the benefits of which dwarf the amounts being discussed in the negotiations.

It is significant that last week's discussion of a new budget comes at a time of change and reflection within the EU. In addition to the departure of the UK, in May last year a new European Parliament was elected, and a new European Commission under the Presidency of Ursula von der Leyen took office in December.

Work is under way to prepare for a conference on the future of the EU. Irish people are strongly supportive of our membership of the EU. We want one built on values, and this perspective is very much reflected in the strategic agenda agreed by the European Council last June. This focuses on protecting citizens and freedoms; developing a strong and vibrant economic base; building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe; and promoting European interests and values on the global stage. Ireland's input was informed by a series of citizens' dialogues on the future of Europe led by the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee. These significant conversations, held across the country, were about what Europe means to our citizens and what they want it to mean in the future.

In recent times we in Ireland have seen at first hand the value of European unity. The EU is a union of nations as well as of peoples, in which small states are protected and respected. While we should not neglect the costs of EU membership, we must also reflect on the benefits and advantages it confers on members.

Investments made through the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, are vital for delivering European added value and for furthering the European ideals of solidarity, partnership and co-operation. It is important that the MFF is appropriately funded to meet the challenges faced by the European Union.

In addition to discussing the MFF, last week's European Council also agreed a declaration on the situation in Idlib in light of the renewed military offensive by the Syrian regime and its backers. We called on all actors to cease hostilities, to respect fully their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and to allow unimpeded and direct humanitarian access to all those in need. The Tánaiste will provide further detail on developments in Syria in his statement.

While agreement on the MFF was not possible on this occasion, I expect the European Council to return to the matter in the weeks and months ahead. The next regular meeting will

take place later this month, on 26 and 27 March. The agenda for the March European Council typically includes an economic element, and the provisional agenda provides for a discussion on strengthening our economic base. It is also proposed to discuss digital issues. Leaders will also discuss enlargement again, having agreed in October to revert to this subject before the EU-Western Balkans summit, which will take place in Zagreb in May. As ever, leaders will take the opportunity to discuss external relations and other topical issues. I anticipate we will have the opportunity for a pre-European Council debate here in the House, and further detail can be provided on that occasion.

When it comes to European matters there has always been a large degree of consensus in the Oireachtas and support for the Government of the day. While a new Government is being formed, however long that may take, the current Government will continue to represent Irish interests in Europe and make the case for what we believe is better for Europe as a whole.

I welcome the views of other leaders today and in the days and weeks ahead, which will inform our approach in these negotiations. Our strength during the first phase of Brexit was the unity we enjoyed and built up with fellow member states and the unity we saw at home. I believe the same approach will be our strength as we begin the second phase of Brexit and it will ensure the Irish position is strongly articulated during the negotiations over the seven-year budget.

**Deputy Micheál Martin:** Ar dtús báire, admhaím go bhfuil deacrachtaí faoi leith ag baint le cúrsaí san Eoraip, go háirithe ó thaobh cúrsaí eacnamaíochta, cúrsaí airgeadais agus polasaí sóisialta de. Is léir ó chruinniú na Comhairle go raibh deacrachtaí faoi leith ag baint leis an gcáinainnéis. I mo thuairim agus i dtuairim Fhianna Fáil, níl go leor ann chun aidhmeanna na hEorpa a bhaint amach nó a chur i bhfeidhm, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs cúrsaí taighde agus cúrsaí a bhaineann leis an timpeallacht. Is oth liom a rá nach raibh ceannaireacht ag teacht ó aon áit san Eoraip maidir leis an treo gur cheart dúinn dul sna blianta atá romhainn sna cainteanna a bhí ar siúl an tseachtain seo caite. Is léir go bhfuil géarghá ann i bhfad níos mó áiseanna a chur isteach i gcáinainnéis na hEorpa chun na haidhmeanna sin a bhaint amach sa todhchaí. Maidir le stair na tíre seo ó na 1970í amach, is léir go bhfuil dul chun cinn an-mhór le feiscint maidir le cúrsaí eacnamaíochta agus sóisialta na tíre seo de bharr go rabhamar inár mball den Aontas Eorpach. Caithfidimid é sin a rá. Tá dlúthbhaint idir dul chun cinn eacnamaíochta na tíre seo le 50 bliain anuas agus muid a bheith páirteach go lánaimseartha san Aontas Eorpach. Caithfidimid an bunfhírinne sin a bhaineann leis an Eoraip a chur os comhair na Dála.

This is a period of great uncertainty for the European Union and its members. The basic principles upon which this community of free democracies has been built are under attack and there is a desperate need for leadership in overcoming genuinely historic social, economic and environmental challenges. The debates have been going on for most of the past decade and there is no more time to waste. Ireland and the whole of Europe need real urgency, ambition and leadership. Unfortunately, once again, the latest summit failed to take decisive action. Most radical and progressive options for developing the Union appear to have been shelved. Yet again, we are stuck in a zero-sum negotiation which looks set to deny the Union the ability and capacity to deliver on the mandate it has received.

All of the reports from the negotiation suggest that the dispute is focused on an amount of money which is a fraction of the national income of any of the principal countries involved. Those who oppose an increased budget also demand cuts to existing programmes to create the space to address other areas, such as energy, research and the just transition to a zero-carbon

Union. Yet again, we see the repeat of the debate that has undermined the Union for much of the past four decades. Every time a major issue arises, the member states agree that common action supported by the Union is the only way to tackle the issue and it is added to the agenda. However, member states also insist that the Union's budget should continue to be limited to 1% of combined national incomes. This is why every time the budget is being negotiated pressure is placed on the CAP and it is claimed that somehow it is a waste and should be scaled back. This pressure is not based on an objective assessment of the fact that the CAP has delivered food security to Europe for the first time in its history or that it is central to efforts to protect rural life. Countries stating that their citizens simply will not accept any increase in the budget repeat the same error that successive Governments in the United Kingdom made in the decades before Brexit. Their rhetoric directly empowers Eurosceptics by promoting the idea of a wasteful Brussels spending our money. Instead, they should be saying that if we want greater economic security, clean energy and the innovation upon which our future relies then one tenth of 1% of national income is really not that much to pay.

While Ireland made very serious errors in the past three years by aligning itself with the opponents of any increase, the reversal of this position in the past six months has been welcome. We agree with the basic approach that Ireland should be willing to see its contribution increase in return for protecting existing programmes and expanding support for new actions, particularly the European green deal proposed by the Commission. It is, at best, a shame that Ireland refused to engage with the move made by President Macron early in his term to discuss how we could help the Union to be more dynamic and effective. What is different in the negotiations for this budget period is that many other issues are being discussed. Those issues combine to greatly complicate the ability to reach an outcome.

There has been some suggestion that the Polish and Hungarian Governments are seeking to use negotiations to block actions against them for violations of basic democratic and rule-of-law principles. This is a very worrying and regressive development. Ireland should stand with the countries refusing to accept this type of behaviour. To break the deadlock, it is likely that something will have to be done on the wider challenges of not just the size of the European Union budget but also reform of broader European Union economic policies.

Fianna Fáil believes that many of the Commission's proposals are reasonable and have the potential to form part of a more flexible outcome to discussions. There is simply no way that member states will meet essential climate targets without a dramatic increase in the scale and affordability of financing for dedicated climate programmes. An historic challenge requires a breaking of existing constraints. The European green deal proposed by the Commission must be supported. It is an exceptional action which, in the context of those parts that require direct funding rather than financing, simply cannot be implemented within current budget constraints.

We very strongly support the flexibility proposed by the Commission in the recently published fiscal rules review. Countries will not be able to rapidly or comprehensively implement plans for clean energy, energy-efficient buildings, expanded public transport and other critical actions if they are forced to operate within existing inflexible fiscal rules. Allowing extra space to fund climate projects should be agreed well before the current deadline of the end of next year. Giving national governments this flexibility will take some of the pressure off the EU budget.

We also strongly support the proposal to reform state aid rules by allowing for a green priority. This would directly enable countries such as Ireland to start showing greater dynamism

in building a leading-edge industrial base in climate innovation. In the past, we went from a standing start to being a world leader in sectors such as medical devices, microprocessing and software. We must aim to do so again in the field of carbon-free innovation. A green priority in state aid could make a critical difference and deliver major social, economic and environmental benefits. We also support the proposal to turn the European Investment Bank into a dynamic climate bank, taking the lead in financing both public and private programmes to reduce carbon emissions permanently. However, this will not replace the need to finance programmes directly, particularly in the case of just transition investments for industries and support for rural communities, which will bear the greatest impact of transition measures if they are not helped. Funding the EU in order that it will meet the challenges we set for it starts with a fair budget agreement but also includes this much wider agenda. At a minimum, Ireland should support all efforts that take climate action out of the realm of a zero-sum debate against existing projects.

Separately, I reiterate that Fianna Fáil supports the expansion of research and education funding in general. Europe's critical innovation and social inclusion goals cannot be achieved without more ambitious programmes. We also believe that funding for the asylum, migration and integration fund is nowhere near the level it needs to be at, not least in respect of the ability to fund proper support programmes for new residents. EU funding supports almost all activity in this field but it is not enough to meet the needs of Europe post 2015.

The summit briefly discussed the appalling circumstances in the Idlib province in northern Syria. The attacks by the Assad forces and their Russian allies are bringing in a new wave of misery to more than 1 million people. Syria continues to be the greatest humanitarian disaster of the century, and the brutal conflict inflicted on the Syrian people by the regime remains the core reason for this. There have been many reports about the knock-on effects of the renewed attack, including a return to widespread emigration and the pushing of refugees both towards and away from the Greek border. This is fundamentally something that must be dealt with in accordance with basic humanitarian principles. We believe that Ireland should work with other countries to get full information about what is happening and to insist that the rights and dignity of people fleeing a brutal conflict are respected.

The issue of the mandate for trade negotiations with the UK was not discussed at the summit but we should note it. There are deeply worrying signs that the UK Government is prepared to seek what is effectively a no-deal outcome. While we can pass comment on how the UK is changing its position from the joint declaration, it is true that the declaration has no legal force and the UK is entitled to set whatever red lines it wishes. However, two urgent points arise in respect of Ireland. First, commitments relating to the Border have legal force, and we need immediate clarity on whether the British Government intends to honour such commitments and on what exactly it is doing to honour them. Second, it is clear we need to ramp up dramatically preparations to help companies that would be hit by new barriers to east-west trade. A failure to reach a trade deal will threaten Ireland with a permanent loss of more than 3% of GNP, as well as tens of thousands of jobs, unless mitigating actions are taken. Brexit is done but it has not yet been decided what its full impact will be. Ireland must continue to see this as a core national priority.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** We have not had the opportunity to discuss issues relating to the EU since the UK formally left the EU on 31 January. I begin my remarks, therefore, by paying tribute to the former Sinn Féin MEP for the North of Ireland, Martina Anderson. I commend her on her tireless work and effort as a Member of the European Parliament for the past eight years. Go raibh míle maith agat, Martina, agus maith thú. I also wish the new Sinn Féin

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MEP for the Midlands-North West, Chris MacManus, the very best of luck in his new role as he takes up the post previously held by the new Teachta for Cavan-Monaghan, Deputy Carthy. I know from experience that being an MEP is no easy job, so I wish Chris well as he takes up the baton from Matt. I commend both of them on all of their efforts.

Europe finds itself facing many challenges in the coming years. The outworkings of Brexit rumble on; it is far from done. The climate emergency looms as an issue requiring urgent international and European co-operation. Migration, and the manner in which European countries and the system as a whole respond to it, is a significant issue, as can be seen in what is currently happening in the Mediterranean and at the Greek-Turkish border. The impact of the coronavirus is being felt across our Continent. In light of recent proposals on the EU's multi-annual financial framework, our farmers face a dramatic loss of income, on top of existing pressures in the agriculture sector.

Meanwhile, we face massive pressures at home in housing and health, in securing a dignified pension age and in making our tax system fairer. These are challenging times. Despite that, we have two parties in the Dáil engaged in shadow-boxing and playing games with the intent of laying out a pathway for government together. That is an outcome which would fly in the face of the type of change that people voted for on 8 February. We all know what they are at. They might at least be honest with themselves and with each other. For Sinn Féin's part, we are intent on something different because we want a Government for change. Our efforts in that regard are serious and real. We have worked hard with others to form that Government. By that, I mean a Government that will invest in public services, address the trolley crisis and open hospital beds, build homes, reduce and freeze rents and give workers and families a break.

On the future relationship between our island and Britain, we want to be clear that we need to build very strong and lasting relationships. It is a matter of alarm, although it should not be a matter of great surprise, that the British Tory Government appears to be renegeing on commitments it has entered into and we must resolve not to allow that to happen. It is essential that the protections agreed in the Irish protocol of the withdrawal agreement are maintained, honoured and implemented. That is vital and that is what Sinn Féin will work towards. We want seamless trade and all that goes with that to be a feature of the future relationship between this island and Britain. After all, that is in our interests and in Britain's interests. On this matter, I believe there is political consensus in this Dáil. There certainly was in the previous Dáil and I hope that will continue.

We should not lose sight of the fact that in the coming years it will be necessary to recognise and address the reality that one part of our island is now outside of the European Union, while the other part is inside it. That is not sustainable into the future. That is why Sinn Féin has made it clear that planning for a referendum on Irish unity has to start now. There can be no further delay and a referendum in that regard should be held within the next five years. To that end, it will be essential to publish a White Paper on Irish unity, to establish an Oireachtas joint committee on Irish unity and, importantly, to establish an all-island conversation - an assembly or forum - to discuss and plan the pathway ahead for all of our people. We should not lose sight of the fact that the North voted to remain inside the European Union and that the people of the North had their say on that matter. They must have their say again in the future on a new Ireland. Unity is the way forward.

After a long and frustrating period since we last met to debate in this format, the North's power-sharing Government has been re-established. There is no contradiction in actively work-

ing power-sharing and the arrangements of the Good Friday Agreement, while at the same time preparing for constitutional change. Since the institutions have been re-established, the Executive has done good work. I commend every party to the power-sharing Government. I particularly recognise the work of the Sinn Féin team under the leadership of joint First Minister Michelle O'Neill. They are hard at it and are determined to do much more in the time ahead. So far, the bedroom tax has been binned and 38,000 households have been protected from Tory cuts. They have moved quickly to end the pay inequalities for health workers, who now enjoy equal pay. A new housing programme has been announced, along with additional funding for education, and the victims and survivors of the contaminated blood scandal in the North will receive the compensation they are due. These are examples of good government leading from the front. That is what must apply at a European level as well as here at home.

The current European Union multi-annual budgetary proposals to increase European defence and military spending dramatically flies in the face of Irish foreign policy and Irish priorities. We are militarily neutral, and we have no business sending money to Brussels to be spent on the development of an EU army, on munitions and to involve ourselves further in NATO.

Not alone are these matters wrong, what makes it worse is that all of this comes at a time when there is a proposal to decrease dramatically the funding for the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, to the tune of €53.2 billion over six years. Let us speak plainly about that. This will make Irish family farms unviable. It would have a devastating impact not only on farmers but also on rural Ireland.

Alongside this, Irish farmers need to contend with the EU-Mercosur trade deal coming down the tracks. This is a matter we debated in the previous Dáil. It is essential that the Irish Government protects Irish interests and Irish agriculture and rejects this deal.

Sinn Féin is very clear with regard to the CAP. There should be no budget cuts, and we need to restructure payments to ensure that funding available is used to increase payments to farmers on the lower end of the scale and not to the big ranchers.

Ireland is now a net contributor to the EU budget and has been for some time. As such, we need to ensure we use our voice to reject any proposal to decrease CAP funding. This Government, in its caretaker capacity, should immediately convene a discussion on this matter with all parties in this Dáil because it is a matter of vital national importance.

By the time we have European Council statements again, I very much hope we will have a new Government in place. I have made the point already that there is no need for a lengthy delay in this process. There is a lot of work to be done. There are many changes to be made.

Sinn Féin wants to deliver on our commitments to the people and to deliver for those who have placed their trust in us. Other parties here also have that mandate for change, and we want to work alongside them. There are others who are intent on extricating themselves from that process and there are those who still cling desperately to the *status quo*.

We know well that the politics of exclusion does not work. It never has and it never will. Those who choose to disrespect the hundreds of thousands of people who vote for Sinn Féin should wise up and accept that the days of the political establishment having it their own way are over. The people have said so loudly and clearly and their message must be heard.

The business of doing politics, the business of better government and the business of de-

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livering for the people is all about charting something new - a new way forward. I have laid out some of the very serious issues facing us at home and abroad. We are all more than up to facing those challenges with real solutions that deliver for our people domestically, across the European stage and internationally.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Eamon Ryan. Is the Deputy sharing time with Deputy Noonan?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am sharing time with Deputy Noonan. We are in a difficult space in the European Union. We are still seeing the backwash from the failed way we expanded. The book, *The Light That Failed*, by Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev, got it right in that Europe, as it expanded, told everyone that it was the end of history, that there was only one model, that we should do what the Commission said, that these were the rules and that we had no choice. That left a bitter taste in many of the accession countries that still has consequences today. We need to take that into account in any further expansion of the European Union, which we would support, to ensure we do not make the same mistakes.

In Germany, that factor is still at play. The big story in German politics now - the Christian Democrats working with the far right - is unsettling. I would imagine that Germany is looking inward rather than looking to Europe in those circumstances. The same is happening in France. Monsieur Macron announced his big initiative, but since then he has lost the political capital at home. His loss of political capital means that no one takes the future of Europe programme that he set out as seriously. The UK, which is the third of the traditional three largest EU member states, has not only left the EU but almost seems willing to act as a rogue state in international affairs, if we believe what it has said as part of its negotiating position. This makes our place in Europe a difficult one.

Perhaps partly as a result of some of the knocks taken by the EU in recent years, it is moving towards a process which allows more subsidiarity. I will refer to two areas that were considered at a recent meeting of the European Council. On climate change, it has told nations that as they draft national energy and climate action plans, they should return with approaches that are appropriate to themselves within broad parameters. There was real concern yesterday in Brussels that the draft of the new climate law shows a lack of ambition. This may be because of the current lack of certainty in Europe and lack of leadership because of the division between east and west within the EU. There has been a failure to set a higher 2030 target, although it may well come - we can expect it to come - in the coming months. That should not stop us. We are similar to Denmark and the Netherlands in size and our position within the EU. Like them, we should set ourselves ambitious targets for 2030 as the House has already done. The closing action of the Committee on Climate Action in the last Dáil was to commit each party to a 50% reduction by 2030. No matter what happens in the EU, we should stay on that course because it will bring Ireland economic opportunity and place ourselves as leaders rather than laggards on this critical issue.

Similarly, I understand that the Commission is leaving considerable flexibility to each nation state in how it implements Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, reform. We accept the nine goals, including a fair income for farmers, addressing the power imbalance that exists at the moment, tackling environmental issues and ensuring we have good rural development. Accepting the broad outline goals set by the EU, it is up to us to decide how we implement CAP reform. I support the comments of Deputy Micheál Martin and others that we should look to enhance our contribution as part of a more dynamic Union which functions better. If funding

does not come from Europe, we will have to set funding aside ourselves to support whatever CAP proposals we set to ensure our farmers are paid a proper income and we address the crisis in our own way.

These are only two of the issues which were considered but they are two of the biggest and they are connected. We must show leadership even if the Union remains in an uncertain state.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call on Deputy Noonan to make his maiden address to the House.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** Is mór an onóir é feidhmiú mar ionadaí don phobal, do dhaonra Cheatharlach-Cill Chainnigh, agus do dhaonra na tíre mar Bhall den Tríocha-tríú Dáil. Gabhaim comhghairdeas le gach duine a bhí tofa agus le gach duine a bhí misniúil go leor chun iad féin a chur in iúl don toghchán. It is a great honour for me to represent my community, the people of Carlow-Kilkenny and indeed the people of this country in the Thirty-third Dáil. I congratulate all those who were elected and all who had the courage to put themselves forward for election.

The Green Party has had an interesting and challenging 12 days, engaging in collaborative dialogue with other parties and independent Deputies to explore common threads in policy which could lead to Government formation. While some parties have entrenched themselves towards opposition or oppose negotiating with others, we believe there is a collective responsibility on us all once elected to this House to provide stable and strong Government for the people of Ireland in these important years. For us, everything must change from here on in. We need to change how we organise our whole society, move from a linear to a circular economy, change our food, mobility, housing, health and energy systems, and empower communities to lead the change from the ground up, using creative practices. To achieve this, we must challenge the economic growth agenda and consider broader and alternative measures of the progress of our nation. It is no longer acceptable to hope that a rising tide will lift all boats. Invariably that leaves behind vulnerable groups like migrants, asylum seekers, Travellers and people with disabilities.

*3 o'clock*

Equally, it does not address the ecological crisis. Billy Bragg put it well when he said: “Capitalism is like fire: keep it under control and it will give you heat and light; leave it untended and it will consume everything in its path.” I hope we can work collaboratively and collectively, share views and legislate for the common good, with compassion and empathy, challenging the current paradigm with what Wolfgang Streeck terms eco-solidarity, whereby human rights and ecological principles are highly valued. This requires a co-operative and cultural revolution.

In regard to the European Council statement, the deal forged between the European Union and Turkey in 2016 to contain refugees within Turkey’s borders is unravelling. A humanitarian crisis of our own making is taking place along the Turkish-Greek border, where tear gas is being used on men, women and children. The Russian-assisted Assad campaign in Idlib is forcing tens of thousands of people to flee as the Syrian conflict nears its bloody end. The level of human suffering is indescribable, yet the EU is set to spend €38.3 billion on border security between 2021 and 2027 and increase the number of Frontex border force guards to 10,000 within that timeframe. Imagine if we were able to sink that same level of investment into development aid, conflict resolution, climate adaptation and the global south. Some 18,000 souls have drowned along the world’s deadliest border - the Mediterranean Sea. NGOs are being

prosecuted for rescuing migrants, despite it being a matter of international law to rescue persons in distress. Civil society vessels have rescued as many as 40% of the 80,000 people rescued from search-and-rescue, SAR, zones. President Erdoan is using the threat of allowing people to move across the Greek and Bulgarian borders in order to force the EU to back his campaign in Syria. This is, to say the least, sickening.

Free movement of people has been the cornerstone of the European project since its foundation but, obviously, this only applies to people who are economically useful to member states. This is surely what we rallied against with Brexit. Yet, of the 26 million people displaced overseas globally, 85% are living in the global south. The World Bank estimates that 143 million people are likely to be displaced internally within their own countries by 2050 due to the impacts of climate change. In Australia and California, we witnessed climate refugees from the developed world standing on beaches, waiting to be rescued as their homes burned behind them. Our German Green MEP colleague, Erik Marquardt, stood witness to the scenes in Lesbos, an island community that can no longer cope. The new European Council must adopt a new approach to the migrant and refugee issue because it will not go away. What we are standing over is shameful: statements of solidarity from the EU for Greece but not for the refugees. This is not the European Union that we, as Greens, value and cherish. It is not the European project based on peace and solidarity and has more in common with the wall erected by the Trump regime. These walls and barriers need to be torn down.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** The European Council of 20 February failed. It failed to reach agreement on the multi-annual financial framework for the next seven years. It failed to take robust action to resolve the humanitarian rights abuses and the growing crisis occurring in Syria, and, according to official documents, it failed to even discuss Covid-19, which had already been declared a public health emergency of international concern three weeks before, on 30 January last.

As others have stated, there is a crisis of leadership in the democratic world. The European Union needs to present solutions to the rise of the xenophobia, protectionism and backward-looking nationalism that is all too visible in Britain and the United States, and on Europe's eastern borders. It also needs to provide leadership on the challenges of climate change, on migration and on new infectious diseases.

Speaking to the European Parliament, Michel Barnier described a conversation he had with one of the architects of Brexit, Nigel Farage. Barnier asked Farage about his vision of UK relations with the European Union post Brexit. Farage's simple reply was that the EU will not exist after Brexit. This is clearly the attitude of Brexiteers and, potentially, the attitude of some within the current British Government. There is no doubt that the United Kingdom will continue to influence the European Union for the foreseeable future. This is inevitable, given the geographical proximity of Britain, and the size of the British economy. There are still many people in the UK who are pro-EU but the current British Government is clearly not. In recent statements, British Government spokespeople have retreated from legal commitments made in the withdrawal agreement about a level playing field and they are coy about Northern Ireland's status. It has also walked back from our clear understanding of the future EU-UK relationship as outlined in the negotiated political declaration.

Some senior British spokespeople have called for unlimited trade with the European Single Market but without any of the legally binding commitments to equivalent standards. Given the volume of trade involved, British access to the Single Market on the same basis as Canada

would constitute a genuine threat to the cohesion of the European Union from Brexit. In this context, where we need to strengthen the EU, the wrangling over the EU budget for the next seven years is a failure of leadership and solidarity. The so-called “frugal four” governments of Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, including, regrettably, two governments involving the Labour Party’s sister parties in Europe, are making a serious error of judgment by trying to limit the EU’s budget to 1% of GDP.

It is as clear as day that the EU needs to do more to tackle climate change. It is equally clear that it needs to do more to solve the tragedy of the growing refugee crisis on our own doorstep, which has worsened in recent days, as other speakers pointed out, as Turkey has weakened its co-operation with Europe. We have to carry out these major undertakings without the financial contribution that the UK made previously as a member state. It is simply nonsensical for member states to insist that the EU do more without being willing to put in place adequate funding to address these major challenges. What we are seeing is several governments echoing Thatcher’s narrow-minded transactional perspective of Europe, one based on what one pays in and gets out. The existence of the European Union is being viewed in those very narrow balance book terms, which ignores the enormous benefit of being part of a Single Market of over 400 million people where governments routinely co-operate to their mutual advantage. It is time for all EU member states to show solidarity with each other and with the people of Europe. If issues like climate and migration are best dealt with at EU level, as we are saying, then that is the level where we should put in the necessary funds, rather than keep the same money at national or local level for policies that demonstrably will be less effective and cost-efficient in achieving our common objectives.

Getting the seven-year budget framework agreed at the next Council meeting scheduled for 27 March will be a major test of leadership for the European Union. The situation in Syria is another major test. I mentioned that the European Council failed at its previous meeting to take robust action. To be more specific, human rights abuses are being committed right now in Syria by the Assad regime. It is not enough, as the EU has done, to simply condemn these attacks and call for others to cease fire. The EU should and could have done more to tighten sanctions, not only on the Syrian regime but on the backers of the Assad tyranny. Europe needs to speak and act with both clarity and firmness.

The EU’s negotiating position for engaging with the UK has been recently published. Likewise, the UK’s negotiating position has also been set out. To say the least, there are major differences in the starting position of two sides. The UK has rowed back on its commitments to a level playing field, while the EU has rightly doubled down on our collective insistence that we protect workers’ rights, consumer rights and the hard-won environmental standards that we put in place. We are likely to see difficult negotiations on dispute resolution, data protection, fishing rights and whether the EU gives British financial services access to our financial markets. I have confidence that Michel Barnier will robustly defend European interests. I know that he is well briefed on Ireland’s vulnerability to Brexit and on the details of our specific concerns.

At the same time, the European Council will be highly influential on the EU’s decisions about trade with the UK. There is no doubt that there will be pressure from many sources simply to get a deal done rather than allow trade to revert to WTO terms at the end of this year. In the short term, trading on WTO rules would be seriously damaging to Ireland. Nobody is under any illusion about that. However, we cannot let the short term dictate our long-term national interest. Ireland’s basic freedom to develop its own economy and society as it chooses will be highly constrained if the UK is permitted to trade with the European Single Market with lower

environmental standards, weaker data protection and fewer workers' rights. This would create an intolerable future for Ireland in which the size of the UK in terms of population and economic clout would pull Ireland down to lower standards to compete.

Whatever deal is made, there will be no political appetite to reopen the future EU-UK deal in the short term. As such, Ireland will be locked into whatever deal is done in the coming months. That is why we must defend our long-term interests, which are aligned with high-quality standards and robust regulation of the Single Market, not the deregulatory approach that the UK is advancing.

The UK left the EU at the end of January, but the real challenge of Brexit has yet to come. It is imperative that we have a strong Government in place as soon as possible to fight for Ireland's long-term national interest. There will be difficult battles in the months ahead. Whoever is Taoiseach on 27 March will travel to the next European Council meeting, which will be a pivotal one. He or she should outline in the House in the coming days how he or she foresees those vital interests being defended. Perhaps the three Members of this House who see themselves as potential taoisigh might rise to this challenge and set out in the coming days their visions for how those interests will be protected.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Holly Cairns will now make her maiden address to the House.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I would like to say how grateful I am to the people of Cork South-West and what an honour it is to represent them here. Brexit-related uncertainty might be at the front of our minds since the European Council meeting, but it is fair to say that a reduction in Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, payments has been on the cards since the European Commission put forward its original budget proposal in May 2018. At the very heart of the new arrangement discussed in February is the Irish protocol, which appears to guarantee unfettered trade on the island of Ireland, North-South and *vice versa*. Of course, the question is whether this measure will stay in place regardless of whatever future trade arrangements are agreed between the UK and the EU. From an agricultural perspective this means looking at issues that could disharmonise agri-trade arrangements on this island. The most obvious one that springs to mind is a distortion in support measures between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Given the dependence of Irish farm incomes on CAP payments, there is inevitably concern over what future negotiations could mean for CAP payments to Irish farmers and the possibility of any disparity or unfair advantage arising on the island.

We know that in recent weeks the Westminster Government has committed to maintaining farm funding at 2019 levels for the next five years. This of course includes Northern Ireland, where the new Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has already confirmed the farm support budget for 2020. In the South, within this largely unchanged total, the Commission proposed to shift spending priorities away from the two big-ticket items, namely, cohesion and agricultural spending, towards other priorities. With respect to the CAP, it proposed a reduction of 15% in constant 2018 prices. This was skewed in favour of a small 11% cut in Pillar 1 spending and a much larger cut of 27% in Pillar 2 spending. In real terms, average direct payments would fall by between 10% and 11%, with a greater cut of 25% in rural development spending. The cuts are less significant in nominal terms. Farmers would see an average 3% cut in the nominal amount of their direct payments, while nominal spending on rural development would be cut by 12%. There has never been any attempt or commitment to inflation-proof these payments. From this perspective, a cut of 3% or 4% to the nominal direct payment may sound

small, but it will have a big impact on smaller family farmers already struggling to make ends meet.

Although this will not in itself be a decisive factor in the future of Irish farming, the climate and biodiversity crises will be. I am honoured to be the agriculture spokesperson for the Social Democrats. I was advised by family and friends not to touch this brief with a bargepole because it is seen as a lose-lose role. To date, all we have seen in the House is farmers pitted against environmentalists. The conclusion is that someone is always going to be offended. As a west Cork farmer, I believe changing the narrative is an important place to start. We have to be able to have a productive conversation, no matter how controversial or emotive the issue can be. It is fair to say that CAP, more specifically CAP reform, can be an emotive topic. There is a good reason for that. As payment systems go, CAP often raises more issues than it solves.

There are many of us in the farming community who do not believe it is fair that a small number of farms are able to take the lion's share of the payments when smaller family farmers throughout the country are at factory gates because they cannot get a fair price for their hard work. More farmers are left wondering why we are now being blamed for the climate change crisis because of practices we were actively encouraged and financially incentivised to engage in. The climate and biodiversity crises are real, but it is not outlandish to suggest that both of these things, ironically, have been funded by taxpayers through the CAP. This is not a personal failure of farmers but a systemic and policy failure. I will give an example. A few years ago a Department official came to my farm and docked me €800 from my area aid payment because I had bushes encroaching on fields. In other words, I was financially incentivised to damage the biodiversity of my own farm.

I am a farmer but I am also a scientist. It is time to change the way we talk about farming in this country. Instead of viewing farmers as the problem, we need to realise that they are the solution. I include farmers themselves in that, because we have to change. This is what succession planning looks like in 2020 and in the face of our climate and biodiversity crises. If we want the next generation to stay on the land, we have to give them a reason to stay. We have to allow them to make a reasonable and fair living for what we would all agree is extremely hard work.

What if we paid our farmers to take care of the landscapes on which the future of the industry depends instead of incentivising them to industrialise it? What if we paid and supported them in moving away from practices we now know are destructive and helped them open up the new opportunities that will come with the changes we need to make? I would rather see CAP reform that supported farmers and protected the sector in a sustainable way than a system that forces us into intensified production, depends on overconsumption to survive, and allows farmers to take the blame for the inevitable results we are now facing.

As smaller farmers have seen all too clearly over the past 12 months, they are likely to be swallowed up by that system, yet all we ever seem to hear from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is a defence of the sector's growth targets. Officials quote old data to tell us that we in Ireland do things with some kind of magic formula that means it is all right for us to release greenhouse gases, because if we do not, another country will. There is no sustainability in that. More recent data from the UN tells us that we release more carbon per euro's worth of food produced than any other European country. There is no sustainability in that. We say things like we need to feed the millions around the world, but we are already a net calorie importer. We decry the burning of the Amazon to clear land for cattle and then import feed

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grown on that cleared land for our own cattle. There is no sustainability in that. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has warned that the world depends on topsoil to grow 95% of its food, but that is rapidly disappearing under the strain of intensive production. If we continue to degrade our topsoil at the rate we are now, we could run out within 60 years. Imagine 60 harvests of food left. There is no sustainability in that.

Our sector is vulnerable. We all know about the small number of very wealthy businesses, but for the overwhelming majority of us, farming is not a lucrative business. However, it plays an extremely valuable role in our rural towns and communities, and CAP plays an extremely valuable role in sustaining those family farms and food producers. A representative from a farming organisation told me earlier this week that talk of sustainability in Irish farming was airy-fairy. I cannot agree. Sustainability means making sure there is something to farm tomorrow. It means making sure our kids will also be able to earn a living on the land. It means producing an exceptional, high-quality product that people will pay for and value precisely because it is the product of a truly sustainable system. It is time to view CAP reform through this lens and support farmers through the changes we need to make.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank Deputy Cairns very much and congratulate her on her first contribution.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I wish to share time with Deputy Paul Murphy.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is that agreed? Agreed. This certainly is not Deputy Boyd Barrett's maiden contribution here anyway.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is not, a Cheann Comhairle. It is my maiden speech in the Thirty-third Dáil, but actually it is not that either.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We must check the figures.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The EU's shame is on display in the Greek islands at the moment. Its pretence to be some bastion of progressivity is exposed with the harrowing and terrible scenes of thousands of desperate men, women and children fleeing the most horrendous circumstances of war, oppression, displacement and conflict and then being penned up in this way, subject to violence and living in the most appalling conditions. It exposes the horrible priorities and moral bankruptcy of the EU that we are going to spend €38 billion on beefing up fortress Europe to keep human beings out. It is nothing more than shameful. That this most recent wave of the crisis results essentially from the rotten deal we did with the brutal and repressive regime of Erdogan, and other similar deals we have done with rotten, vicious, brutal militias in Libya and so on, should bring shame to the EU. Deputy Paul Murphy and later Deputy Bríd Smith will take this issue up in more detail. I expect our representatives in Europe to speak out about this and ask to end the inhumane policy of keeping these human beings out. Instead of putting resources into more military spending, Frontex and more fortress Europe security, they should be put into giving a welcome to people fleeing here, providing the resources and services we need for them and for all of our citizens in Europe and ending the shameful treatment of these desperate people.

The dominant issue in Europe now is the coronavirus. I know it will be discussed later but there is a European dimension to this global crisis we now face. As we speak, the figures are rising in the EU. We need to address a number of issues at European level. First, we must say that any actions we need to take to address this crisis and threat that may run foul of intellectual

property rules around vaccines and research in these areas, or proprietary or property rules governing medicine and its distribution - for example, relating to the use of the capacity of private, for-profit hospitals to deal with the capacity problems we may face - should be taken. If rules, including fiscal or state aid rules, need to be broken to address any of these issues, that should be done. It is terribly important that we do that. We should also say that if there is any profiteering across Europe on the back of this crisis involving people trying to raise prices and profiteer from shortages in personal protective equipment, hand sanitisers or any of the medicines people may need to access, it should be severely punished. Severe sanctions should be imposed on any sign of that across Europe. I want to make those points about containing the virus, notwithstanding the debate later this evening on our specific situation here in Ireland.

Any talk of commitment to dealing with climate change is completely incompatible with anything other than abandoning the Mercosur deal. We should be saying that loud and clear. We should also be saying that state aid rules should be completely suspended when it comes to taking the sort of emergency measures or action necessary to address climate change issues. We need to start to say that very loud and clear because many of the state aid rules are completely incompatible with the necessary actions we have to take to address the climate emergency.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** People should look at what is happening at the borders of Greece right now. It is utterly horrifying and shameful. Of all of the disgusting things the EU has endorsed in the past decades, this has to be one of the worst. Dinghies of frozen refugees coming from a war-torn country are being turned away by a European coastguard. As tens of thousands of refugees from Syria, including mothers and children, approach barbed wire fences, they are being shot at by a EU police force - the Greek police force - and being hit by rubber bullets and tear gas to force them away from entry into the EU. Gangs of far-right activists are attacking and marauding through refugee camps in Greece. At least two people so far have been killed while trying to reach Greece, including a young child in a capsized boat. All of that has been endorsed by the EU with the language of saying that Greece is playing Europe's shield, according to the Commission's President, and promising Greece more money and more support to bolster border security. It is utterly disgusting and gives the lie to any imagined EU that is a paragon of democracy and human rights. This is the EU that exists today: a deeply racist, anti-democratic project built on the militarised borders of fortress Europe. These are the real human consequences as a result of it.

The Government should distance itself. It should criticise the approach of the EU. It should do that immediately and speak out about it. The vast majority of ordinary people in Europe would find von der Leyen's comments about Greece being Europe's shield repulsive. We should be distanced from that approach. The Government should also call on the EU to refuse to endorse the Greek proposal to suspend the right of asylum. There is no basis whatsoever to do that under international law. The UN has said that. The right of asylum is now being suspended for a month because the Greek Government has said so. Instead of being endorsed by the EU, that should be condemned by it. The immediate cause of this is decisions for its own purposes by the right-wing Turkish Government. As Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned, it has its roots in past decisions of a right-wing, racist character by the EU, most fundamentally the decision repeatedly to outsource European borders and to outsource to other countries the human rights abuses that are required to keep refugees that are fleeing wars and conflict situations, fuelled by western imperialism. In this case the outsourcing was to Turkey in 2016 in a disgusting, dodgy deal worth €6 billion for the Turkish state at the expense of human rights abuses for those who faced it. That is only one of many deals that have been done with authoritarian regimes

and dictatorships, etc. It is also in line with the decision to stop search and rescue missions by NGOs, including Médecins Sans Frontières, in line with the vote of Fine Gael MEPs to back that up, supposedly because of not wanting the operations of Frontex to be exposed. We need an entirely different approach instead of the militarised border security approach of Frontex.

Frontex needs to be abolished and all of the money relating to it should be invested in search-and-rescue missions. The borders need to be opened to allow Syrian and other refugees into the EU. We need to restore the running of Mediterranean humanitarian rescue operations to member states. The Irish Naval Service should be put at the disposal of the service. The left and the workers' movement need to be to the fore on this issue. If we are not to the fore in demanding both the rights of the refugees and the resources necessary to ensure adequate homes, jobs and services for everybody — there is enough wealth in the EU to achieve this — the far right will certainly be seeking, as in Greece, to divide the poor and very poor and to divert attention from the wealth and resources that exist in society and from those responsible for the crises faced by working-class people.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is 25 days since the election, yet there is no Government with a mandate in this State. This is a scandalous situation. The urgency in the voices of all Deputies before the general election has been replaced by a political establishment that is now an urgency-free zone. It appears that the political establishment is ambling along as if there were no rush whatsoever regarding the crises relating to housing, health, crime, transport and the coronavirus. We are being represented at European Council meetings by a Government that was pushed out of office by the people. The Dáil is not scheduled to sit again until 19 March, which is two weeks away. For most people, that is the length of a summer holiday. It is incredible.

During the last hiatus of the Dáil in 2016, the House was allowed to function at some level. A housing committee was constituted. This was a good idea, and the committee did good work. It is incredible that, right now, every journalist in the country is able to ask questions of the Tánaiste, Ministers and the Taoiseach, yet Deputies with a fresh mandate are not allowed to ask questions of those individuals. The European Council is just another example of that.

The headline issue for the European Council meeting was obviously the super-sized Brexit hole in the budget. A chasm of €75 billion now exists. This is now likely to hurt many sectors, regions and policy ambitions within the EU. One of the sectors most under pressure in Ireland is that which relates to farming. We know already that farmers have been radically hit by a dysfunctional beef market in Ireland. Beef barons are allowed to earn hundreds of millions of euro virtually tax-free, yet the farmers are expected to bring their beef to the factory gates at prices below the cost of production. The average farmer in this State is earning between €8,000 and €10,000. That is less than the pension or welfare. It is an unbelievable figure for a man or woman working approximately 50 hours per week. The income is at this level only because there are subsidies in place. Teagasc estimates that about one third of farmers in the State are making a living from farming. Another third are making a living only because someone else in the household is working off the farm. A full third of farmers are not making a living at all and have either been pushed into poverty or radical debt. The subsidy makes up in the region of 140% of the income of the farmers. If it was taken away, many farmers would be earning incomes in minus figures. In the previous Dáil, we in Aontú sought to bring about a ban on the below-cost sale of beef in order to fix this dysfunctional market. We will do so again in the current Dáil at the earliest opportunity. There is a need for the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to be properly resourced in order that it can tackle the oligopoly that exists in the sector.

The problem is that there is a massive gap in the EU budget which is likely to be filled using cuts in certain areas or increases in national budgets. Obviously, the CAP is coming under fierce pressure. My concern, given that the negotiation has to be completed by the end of the year, is that this country will come under radical pressure with regard to the CAP budget. If that budget decreases significantly at the same time as farmers throughout the country are suffering at such a rate, it will lead only to further poverty and difficulties. The number of farmers in this State is actually very low. There are only about 130,000 farmers operating here at present. Every year, we see that number decrease further.

The other point of pressure on the Government is the contribution the State makes to the budget of the EU. It is reckoned that approximately €720 million was contributed by this State to the European budget last year. It seems as if the Government is already agreeing to a doubling of that amount. There is an opportunity cost if that is the case because the money has to come from somewhere. Given the crises in housing and health, it is very difficult to see where the budget will come from.

I wish to talk about climate change. Climate change is by far one of the most significant challenges the planet faces. It is incredible that, despite all the green-washing within the establishment, this State is at the bottom of the list when it comes to climate amelioration policies and implementation. It is amazing that, at these types of Council meetings, Ireland is doing its best to talk up EU decisions relating to climate change amelioration and the economic changes necessary in this regard when it will fail in it comes to implementing the latter at home. This has the potential to result in the accrual of massive fines for Ireland.

I wish to speak about a number of issues that were not included on the agenda at the recent European Council meeting. One of these relates to how the EU is to go forward. The Union has probably experienced one of the most significant existential crises in recent times. Losing a significant member such as Britain should have led to some self-examination within the EU. However, there appears to be absolutely no introspection within the Union at all. I am firmly of the belief that the biggest challenge to the EU currently is more EU. Federalists and militarists are causing significant damage to the EU project. There seems to be no push-back whatsoever from our Government in that regard. The EU should be a democratic partnership of nation states working together economically on the big-ticket issues, the issues that individual states cannot deal with, such as climate change. There needs to be some flexibility within the EU to allow for democracies to decide on major issues for themselves also. Decisions made closer to the people they affect are better because people can feed into the decision-making process and hold the decision makers to account. It is a truism that it is impossible for citizens in Ireland to hold decision makers in Brussels or Berlin to account on many issues.

I am amazed that the issue of the coronavirus was not, as far as I am aware, raised to any significant level at the EU Council meeting. It obviously represents a significant crisis internationally. Various countries are approaching it in different ways. Considerable respect is due to all the front-line workers who are currently working to mitigate and reduce the spread of the virus throughout Ireland and the rest of the world. It is significant that different countries are dealing with this in different ways. I would like to find out the influence of the EU regarding how we are approaching coronavirus mitigation. Perhaps the Minister will tell us. In Britain, people who returned from affected areas were told at the very start that they should self-isolate. A different policy was proposed here, namely, that only those who came from affected areas and were experiencing symptoms should self-isolate and that the remainder should go on as normal. Other countries are significantly restricting travel from countries that are affected but obviously

Ireland is not. From what the Minister for Health has stated, I understand that one of the reasons Ireland is not doing this is because of the free movement of people within the EU. I would like clarification on whether the EU is directing that element of our policy on mitigating against the spread of the coronavirus. It seems strange that we have a Minister telling Irish people not to go to the infected areas in Italy, while also saying he will not tell people from the affected areas in Italy not to come to Ireland. It is important to know whether Ireland, as a European country, has a full armoury of tools to be able to deal with this crisis.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The next speaker is Deputy Mattie McGrath, who is sharing time with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal rá ar an rud sin. After attending the previous European Council meeting in December, the Taoiseach stated in the House that he had set out Ireland's position on long-established, well-functioning and successful policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, and had made clear that those policies needed to continue to be properly funded. At the European Council meeting in February, he clearly outlined that Ireland was willing to contribute more to the budget over the next seven years. This cannot be done. It means that payments to Irish farmers and important regional and social development programmes, such as INTERREG, will be cut. That is obvious. We now know that despite the Taoiseach's efforts, the Council members essentially rejected Ireland's position, leaving farmers and the agricultural community here with deep concern regarding what cuts to CAP funding will mean. It was reported after the February meeting that Chancellor Angela Merkel had said that the differences were "still too great to reach an agreement" and "we are going to have to return to the subject of the budget" during discussions on the multi-annual financial framework, which is meant to be operational from next year. This is simply unacceptable to Ireland.

As the Government knows, Irish farmers are heavily dependent on EU subsidies, with 56% of average family income coming from direct payments from CAP funds. The CAP also has a significant social reach, not just here but right across the EU. Some 11 million farmers and 22 million other people work regularly in the agriculture sector in the EU. In Ireland, agriculture is the most important indigenous sector. Some 167,500 people are employed in the agrifood sector, while food and drink exports are valued at €12.6 billion annually. That is massive and important. Anything undermining the stability of these sectors will, therefore, have a major knock-on effect.

We have to remember that the proposed cuts to CAP, which appear increasingly likely, will take place in a financial environment that has already seen farmers enduring life-changing cuts to income. We saw the protests during the summer, which were the result of pure desperation. Farmers cannot survive. Having spoken to my colleagues in the Rural Independent Group, it seems people do not understand or believe that point. The sad reality, however, is that small to medium family farms cannot survive. Farmers are leaving the land and their farms are being gobbled up by vulture funds and conglomerates. The ongoing instability and chaos in the beef and suckler sectors are just two issues. We also have the recent bad weather and problems caused by flooding. It is infuriating for farmers to hear talk of how EU budget negotiations often come down to a battle between the net payer countries, represented this time by the "frugal five" of Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, and net recipient countries such as Ireland.

Ireland was far from frugal when it came to putting up billions of euro for the so-called bailout after the European banking fiasco. I called it a clean-out at the time because that was

what it was. We were fleeced. We lavished money into EU coffers to maintain stability, while our own people emigrated in their tens of thousands and tens of thousands more lost their jobs, homes and livelihood. This is not a matter of Ireland not being willing to play its part. We have always played a constructive role in Europe, even when it was against our better interests to do so. We need the next European Council meeting to resolve this matter in a fair and proportionate manner and in such a way that the integrity of Irish agriculture can be protected. That is the least Europe can do for us.

I am very concerned, as are the farming community and farming organisations. We have to up our game here. We have an interregnum at the moment. While the Taoiseach told the House an hour ago that we still have a Government, and that is correct, there is also great uncertainty. There does not seem to be any hurry or urgency in forming a Government. This is very damaging to the rural economy. I remember three recessions and it was the agricultural sector that took us out of them. We cannot go on as we are. We need a strong and coherent voice, one that has a mandate from this Dáil and the electorate. That needs to be done expeditiously. It will be four weeks on Saturday since the people voted. What is going on in here that we cannot get our act together to try to get over this situation? Self-preservation seems to be the name of the game among the bigger parties, rather than having a Government for the people. The message from the people was that we must serve the people and not be self-serving. We must do that post haste.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about this important topic. Farmers, especially suckler and beef farmers, are at a crossroads. Many are not making money. Indeed, they are losing money. We must remember that farmers are not getting payments from Europe as a gift or present. They are supposed to compensate them for not being paid properly and in order that food can be sold more cheaply to the consumers of Europe. We must remember that farmers are entitled to payments because they are not being paid properly for the food they produce. If farmers were being paid properly, they would not be looking for payments.

We must remember that farmers are not beggarmen, thieves or robbers of any kind or distinction but honest and hard-working people who deserve to be paid properly. Mention has been made that the CAP is to be cut by €200 million. Whoever makes up the next Government, whether it is Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, Sinn Féin or whoever, it cannot accept a cut during the negotiations because that would sound the death knell for rural Ireland. It has been said that funding for Pillar 1 could drop by 10%. We cannot accept that. If Ireland has to pay more into the fund, surely we should insist that we get more out of it. Pillar 2, which includes rural development, the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, the areas of natural constraint scheme, ANC, and the pearl mussel scheme, is meant to be cut by 25%. If that happens, it will greatly affect all of the payments coming into the poorer and more deprived areas in rural Ireland.

It has also been said that young farmers who do not give more than 50% of their time to the farm - part-time farmers - will not be entitled to payments. That is absolutely scandalous and ridiculous and it cannot be allowed to happen. Many young farmers cannot survive on the bit of land they have but they do want to keep the door open on their farms. They want to keep their roads in such a way that someone is going up and down and ensure there is life to be seen. It cannot all be about planting forestry and closing down rural Ireland. If we are worth our salt at all, we cannot stand for that. I ask whomever is in the next Government not to stand for that.

There is also talk that, outside of designated areas, regulations and State penalties will apply to carbon-rich soils if farmers do simple things like draining the land to improve it. We cannot allow that to happen. Farmers need to utilise the little bits of land they have and produce as much as they can if they are to survive. When we discuss the levelling off of payment schemes, especially for sheep farmers, it must be remembered farmers in the west need to get more attention than the farmers on the eastern side of the country who have all the options. In places like Glencar, Mangerton in Kilgarvan or other mountainy-hilly land along the west coast, there is only the option of sheep, suckler or beef farming. Farmers cannot plough, sow grain or milk cows on such land. Those farmers have to be looked after and their payments cannot be cut. Maybe the bigger fellows on the eastern side can afford it. The Ceann Comhairle is looking at me. He is a part-time farmer as well.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** On the plains of Kildare.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Farmers in the west cannot afford any cuts, especially those in Kerry who are trying to survive but are not being paid for their produce. We have raised so much about the sucklers. If they do not get some payment in the near future, many of them will close down and have to give up because they are not making a profit. They cannot afford any cut in their payments. Again, it is not a gift or a present like is got at Christmas. It is compensation for not being paid properly for the food they produce.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Tá sé dochreidte agus, i ndáiríre, osréalach a bheith anseo i mbun díospóireachta agus dhá óráid ón Taoiseach agus ó cheannaire Fhianna Fáil gan tagairt, beag ná mór, don ghéarchéim atá ag tarlú ar an teorainn idir an Ghréig agus an Tuirc. Tá sé deacair glacadh leis sin. I mo thuairim, díríonn sé sin an spotsolas ar ár mbréagchráifeacht agus ar an gcur i gcéill atá ar siúl againn mar rialtas. Níl muinín agam go bhfuil muid in ann ár nguth a úsáid mar uirlis síochána sa domhan. A mhalairt atá i gceist. Tá muid ag taobhú le lucht an rachmais agus leis an lámh láidir atá á himirt ar na daoine atá thíos. Ní hé sin an cúlra atá agamsa. Is dócha nach sin an cúlra atá ag an tír seo. Cuireann an cur i gcéill agus ár mbréagchráifeacht ó thaobh na dteifeach olc orm. Tá an bhearna sin le feiceáil sna hóráidí inniu.

It is almost surreal to be taking part in a debate about the future of Europe. We have no copy of the Taoiseach's speech. I am not sure why that is the case. I listened carefully to it when he spoke about the next step, which will be a conference on the future of Europe. It will not be a conference on the emergency existing on the border between Turkey and Greece.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will try to get a copy of the speech.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** It was mind-boggling to listen to a speech of the nature given to us today. It brings into focus our complete hypocrisy as a country – not that of the ordinary people - and ostensibly using our voice as a tool for peace in the world when we are doing the opposite. We had a speech which did not refer to anything concerning the situation in the borderland - the no man's land, the no woman's land and, certainly, the no child's land - between Turkey and Greece with tear gas, guns and violence. When that debate is mentioned, it is reduced to Turkey shoving out people and Greece refusing to take them in. There is no context whatsoever as to why that might have arisen.

D'eascair sé as margadh lofa a rinneadh idir an Eoraip agus an Tuirc in 2016. Tá an margadh sin lofa amach is amach. Rinne an Eoraip iarracht ollmhór éalú as a cuid dualgas agus airgead a chur ar fáil don Tuirc chun an jab a dhéanamh seachas dul isteach leis an dúshlán.

The crisis has arisen from the utter failure of Europe to deal in a positive way with the challenge it faced in 2015 when more than 1 million people fled to Europe for various reasons. Rather than dealing with that, Europe made a rotten deal with Turkey. Europe sought to buy its way out of its obligations. We are now in a situation where Greece is refusing to comply with its international obligations to take in refugees. In a sense, I understand Greece but I do not condone its failure to comply with international legislation.

Will the Ministers in the Chamber address this issue, as well as the failure of the Taoiseach to address it, where a member of the European Union is blatantly refusing to comply with its obligations under refugee legislation? It is not the only country. We have had the unprecedented situation where Irish judges, or at least their representatives, have gone to Poland to march in solidarity such was their concern for the lack of respect shown to the democratic process there. I can mention many other countries, including Hungary and Italy. One would imagine they would have been the subject of a debate today to highlight that we are letting the far right take over. We have created a vacuum in Europe. Instead of dealing with that vacuum, we have an empty *óráid* from the Taoiseach in which he spoke about a conference on the future of Europe and protecting values and interests. The only thing that is being protected is fortress Europe.

We cannot have a sense of outrage or upset about what is happening in our names. I object to the fact it is being done in our name. There is a failure to speak out and say it is not acceptable. The deal was rotten. The Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade knows that it was utterly rotten from the start and we were trying to buy our way out of our obligations. Any organisation worth its salt on the ground told us that and that it would not work. It has not worked. There was a crisis well before this crisis when Turkey purported to open its gates to let refugees, asylum seekers and migrants out. The crisis was on the ground in Greece which was left to deal with extraordinary numbers of people in unacceptable situations.

How many did Europe take in? One would imagine the Taoiseach would have told us that today. A cap of 72,000 was put on the number to be taken in under that deal. We failed to meet that ridiculous cap and took in 27,000 Syrians from Turkey in four years. That was well below the cap. It is significant which countries stood up and took in those refugees, namely, Germany, the Netherlands, France and Finland.

I say all of this in a context of figures which are so damning that it is difficult to say them. In six years, between 2014 and 2019, 19,140 people went missing or drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. Holidays to the Mediterranean take on a new meaning when one looks at the number of people who drowned or went missing. These are the figures I got, which could be wrong. I suspect they are higher.

One would imagine that when we entered into the deal, part of it would have been to monitor it and follow up year on year to see if we were complying with our obligations, bad and all as the market was. We did not even do that. We wait until there is a humanitarian crisis and then we send over an unelected president to show solidarity with Greece, as was pointed out by a Green Party Deputy, but not with the people on the ground. We praise Greece for being a shield and our protection from the influx of these people. These people are seeking protection under international law under which we have the most serious obligations. Do we show solidarity and attempt to analyse or use our voice, a small voice as it is, even to question how this could have happened? How could the ambassador from Turkey be on “Morning Ireland” this morning disputing the amount of money Europe has given Turkey?

*4 o'clock*

Surely it would be simple enough to confirm, given the size of the EU and the number of auditors there. Given their attention to detail when it comes to transgression of EU law, we should have the details written down on paper as to how much money was given and the reason for the delay on it.

I am ashamed - I say that reluctantly - to be here as part of this Dáil while men, women and children are in a no-man's land and certainly a no-family land. It is all being done in our name. It is all for €6 billion given to Turkey which should never have happened. In fairness, Turkey has taken in an astronomical number of people. I do not know how it has managed that, nor do I know how Greece has either. What have we done in this country? Perhaps the Tánaiste might give us the figures today in respect of the 4,000 that we promised to take in many years ago. How many have we actually taken in? It would be helpful if we had a written copy of the speech from the Taoiseach and if that was outlined for us and the difficulties. We have none of it. It is utterly unacceptable.

Ní féidir glacadh leis. Ní féidir leanúint ar aghaidh mar seo. Seo Dáil nua le Teachtaí Dála nua agus tá gá le hoscailteacht agus le trédhearcacht. Is gá dúinn a bheith mar dhaoine daonna agus ceisteanna a chur ar ár shon.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I understand that copies of my speech are on the way so that Deputies who want it will get copies.

Following the Taoiseach's update on the most recent European Council meeting, I will focus on the following issues: the Syrian crisis; migration; the multi-annual financial framework, MFF; Brexit; and the new European Commission's work programme. That is a lot to deal with in ten minutes, but I will try to do as much as I can.

The European Council issued a declaration on Idlib calling on all actors to cease hostilities immediately and to guarantee the protection of civilians. It also called for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court, which I believe to be particularly important.

In following up on this, last week I signed an op-ed with 13 other EU foreign ministers calling on the Syrian regime and its supporters to end this offensive and resume the ceasefire established in 2018. In the past three months, nearly 1 million people have been displaced by the Syrian Government's military offensive. The humanitarian situation is nothing short of a human disaster.

The EU is urgently responding to this crisis and exerting whatever political pressure it can bring to bear to try to deliver a de-escalation of violence. The Commission is working to release €60 million in humanitarian aid for north-west Syria. Ireland contributed over €25 million to the Syrian crisis in 2019 and already this year funding has been authorised specifically to address needs in north-west Syria. I will attend an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council in Zagreb that has been called for tomorrow to discuss this situation and the associated migration crisis.

I am deeply concerned with the migration situation developing at the external EU borders with Turkey. The Syrian crisis has not just had a serious impact on Syria's neighbours, which host over 5 million refugees between them, but also has the potential to impact on the EU. Since the start of the crisis in 2015, I have consistently called on all EU member states to play their

part in burden sharing and helping to relieve the pressure on front-line states, such as Greece, Italy and others. We also need to ensure that people are treated in a way that is consistent with international humanitarian standards and law. I express Ireland's solidarity with Greece and Bulgaria as they face the enormous task of dealing with the thousands of new arrivals at their borders. I also urge both countries to ensure people's personal well-being and to ensure their protection is guaranteed, which clearly has not been happening.

We continue to support the European Council position that a comprehensive approach is essential for a properly functioning EU migration policy. We cannot simply allow some EU countries, which happen to be geographically close to crisis areas, to carry an unfair share of the burden which is what has been happening. While the social, economic and political stresses are considerable, it is essential that humanitarian and legal obligations continue to be met.

I, on behalf of Ireland, have consistently been critical of the EU in the context of the ending of the humanitarian element of the rescue mission in the Mediterranean Sea. I was the Minister for Defence who decided to send Irish Naval Service ships to the Mediterranean Sea in the first place. We had six such missions. I believe Irish ships managed to rescue about 16,000 people from the water. I would certainly be open to committing to do that again in the future if we can have a collective EU position to ensure that is done properly. That is not the position at the moment. It is not possible to get political agreement across the EU on virtually anything relating to a collective approach to migration. This is the core of the problem. I understand the frustrations that many in this House have expressed today.

The MFF is related in many ways. Under heading 6 relating to neighbourhood and the world, the new MFF will align EU actions more closely to our international commitments under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the EU global strategy. Importantly, this will also give the EU the means to reinvigorate its relationship with Africa, which is an important priority for Ireland and which tallies with the new strategy for Africa which the Government published a number of months ago. We are also very supportive of continuing support to the Caribbean and the Pacific, as well as to small island developing states, with which we have forged close relationships in recent years.

Such investments make sense. On issues such as climate change, migration, peace and security, and counterterrorism, the external and internal aspects are intimately interlinked and the new EU budget needs to respond accordingly. We need an external action budget which is more flexible, responsive and coherent, enabling the EU to engage more strategically with its partners across the globe, pursuing our values and protecting our interests. Far too often, external debates within the European Union in the context of our relationship with Africa, north Africa in particular, are dominated by the one issue of migration and it needs to be far broader than that.

While the political focus in Ireland in the context of the MFF will continue to be on Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, budgets for our farmers, it is also important to refer to the important external actions that will need to be funded in the future.

In answer to Deputy Connolly's question on the Irish refugee protection programme, out of the 4,000 that we have committed to accommodate in Ireland, as of December 2019 we had accommodated 3,151, of whom 1,022 were under the EU relocation mechanism. We will certainly follow through in full on that commitment for 4,000 people. I am glad to put that on the record.

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The General Affairs Council on 25 February authorised the opening of negotiations on the future relationship between the EU and the UK and agreed the EU's negotiating mandate. Along with the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, I met the EU Chief Negotiator, Michel Barnier, last week in Brussels in advance of the General Affairs Council.

The EU mandate sets out the EU's clear position, based on the political declaration agreed between the EU and the UK on 17 October 2019, as well as European Council guidelines and conclusions. It provides a generous and fair foundation on which a new EU-UK relationship can be built.

There has been extensive co-ordination across Government to ensure that Ireland's priorities are reflected in the EU mandate, which affirms the EU's ambition for a close and deep partnership with the United Kingdom. Of course, the level of ambition on the UK side will also influence what is possible to achieve.

We welcome the continuing focus in the EU mandate on protecting the Good Friday Agreement and on ensuring that issues arising from Ireland's unique geographic situation are addressed, as well as the protection of the common travel area. Protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the gains of the peace process in all circumstances continues to be a key priority for Ireland and this priority is shared by our EU partners. The UK Government published its approach to the negotiations on 27 February, in advance of the start of negotiations between the EU and the UK on Monday, 2 March. Negotiations will be conducted on behalf of the 27 member states by the task force for relations with the United Kingdom, under Michel Barnier, and the Commission.

Given the UK position that the transition period will not be extended beyond the end of 2020, it may not be possible to reach agreement on all issues being discussed as part of the negotiations in the available time. We will continue to work closely and assess progress with our EU partners as the talks progress. I look forward to updating the House as often as I can while I hold the position that I do.

The work of the period ahead will be to achieve an ambitious and fair partnership that works for the benefit of all and provides a new and strong foundation for the EU-UK relationship, which is certainly in Ireland's interest. At the same time, it is important to see the implementation of the withdrawal agreement. The link between implementation and future relationship negotiations is also reflected in the mandate, and so it must be. The ratification of the withdrawal agreement means that, regardless of the outcome of the EU-UK future relationship negotiations, the protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland will be in place. The protocol includes measures to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland, to maintain the common travel area and the single electricity market, and to protect continuing North-South co-operation into the future.

Ireland welcomes the Commission's work programme for 2020 and broadly supports its proposals. The strong focus on implementing the priorities contained in the strategic agenda adopted by the European Council last June is particularly welcome. Addressing the biggest concerns of our citizens must remain the EU's overriding objective.

We welcome the clear roadmap outlined in the EU's green new deal and its transformative agenda. We look forward to working with all member states and the EU institutions to translate the ambition of the green deal into real and lasting change here and across the European Union.

We welcome the recognition in the Commission's programme of the ongoing work at the

OECD on international tax reform. We remain ready to engage constructively to address any tax challenges that arise from the digitisation of the economy across the EU.

We welcome the review of the EU forest strategy. It is important that natural and plantation forests continue to be recognised for the important role they play in climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies as applied in Ireland and across the European Union.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** I welcome this debate. It is important that the House is kept updated on developments in the European Union, despite the uncertainty on Government formation.

There are huge challenges facing the European Union, some of which were dealt with at the European Council meeting last month. These include negotiations on the 2021-2027 multi-annual financial framework, MFF; the Brexit negotiations; climate change and the EU green deal; the spread of Covid-19; the conflict in Syria; the faltering EU-Turkey migration agreement; and the real threat to European values in Hungary and Poland, which includes blatant discrimination against the LGBT community in Poland. There are a lot of issues there.

On the Brexit negotiations, it seems that the EU-UK trade talks have not got off to a good start. It is clear there is a certain amount of positioning going on between David Frost and Michel Barnier. The UK has said it will cease negotiations if not enough progress has been made by June and that it will not seek an extension of the transition period. Big differences remain with regard to the role of the EU courts, acceptance of EU regulations, fishing rights and financial services, to name just a few issues. There could be a crash out by the end of the year and a no-deal Brexit. In that situation we would then have the World Trade Organization tariffs and controls. We in this House are all aware that a crash-out Brexit would seriously impact on Ireland, particularly in the food sector, manufacturing, tourism and small and medium enterprises. We need a comprehensive free-trade agreement negotiated between the EU and the UK.

There also seems to be some unravelling with regard to the withdrawal agreement and the Ireland-Northern Ireland protocol. We need to commence putting in place the mechanics of this agreement and to provide for the necessary checks. Ireland must prepare also for all Brexit outcomes. Every effort should be made to ensure that companies and businesses are ready for all eventualities. The Government would do well to pay attention to that.

There has been cross-party consensus in this House on Brexit to date. The Government thinks it has done a very good job on the situation so far, but it should not be taken for granted. I hope the Tánaiste and the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs will keep the party leaders and the House fully briefed on future developments on Brexit negotiations.

I shall now turn to the budget and the 2021-2027 multi-annual financial framework. It appears that not much progress has been made on this issue at the recent European Council meeting. Ireland is a net contributor to the EU since 2014. In 2018 our net contribution was €315 million. The new president of the European Commission has set out an ambitious programme for the EU for the next few years, including the new green deal. This programme will need to be funded and the situation is not helped by the €75 billion shortfall, which is a result of the UK leaving the European Union. I agree with the Government's stance on the MFF that we are prepared to increase our contribution, but we must also protect CAP and the cohesion programmes.

Many contributions have been made in the House today on the migration crisis. Nobody could be unmoved by the humanitarian crisis now developing on the Turkey-Greece border. Fianna Fáil expressed reservations about the deal and the impact it would have on refugees fleeing

war and persecution. While understanding and supporting the need to protect the EU borders, it is essential the EU abides by and adheres to the fundamental human rights of refugees and migrants. Migration is a complex and challenging issue. Conflict, forced displacement, extreme poverty, smuggling of migrants and trafficking of human beings cannot be solved with a simple remedy, but as a party we believe it is imperative that all countries take a fair and proportionate share of refugees. We need a humanitarian response to what is happening on the border in Turkey and in Greece. I am delighted that this issue has been debated extensively in the House this afternoon.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Membership of the EU has granted Irish businesses unhindered access to a market of more than 500 million people. EU membership has also established the State as a focal point for foreign direct investment. The recent European Council meeting comes at a very challenging time for businesses across Europe and Ireland. With increased trade disruption, tariff increases from across the Atlantic on key Irish goods and our nearest neighbour leaving the European Union, Irish businesses are facing multiple threats and need to be safeguarded. The onset of the Covid-19 virus will impact on global trade, and the Department of Finance is set to revise economic output in April.

I welcome that the Council meeting will examine improving support to small and medium enterprises, SMEs. Irish SMEs have few alternatives to banking finance and SME loan rejections and SME interest rates are double the EU average. Agreeing a new seven-year MFF budget for the EU requires all member states to match ambitious policies set out for the new green deal, climate change, innovation and digitisation, and with the financial resources to achieve these. Ireland must build support with other countries to reverse the proposed cuts to CAP, given the centrality of the agrifood sector to the rural economy and its role in generating employment. It is imperative that the next MFF budget supports an ambitious and robust research and innovation programme and the establishment of the European innovation council to lead financial supports for businesses. The EU should always put the consumer at the heart of its policies. We are all too well aware that insurance costs are excessive and cripple consumers on a daily basis. In helping to tackle costs in Ireland, the EU can play a role in fostering more competition to help drive down costs for customers. Therefore, I urge the powers that be at EU level to push to create an EU-wide insurance market in order to reduce costs for consumers.

I welcome the inclusion of the midlands in the just transition fund. I ask for an accelerated roll-out of this and that consultation with local community groups be ensured.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I will focus my comments on the CAP budget. The CAP is a cornerstone of the EU's formation. Unfortunately, in recent years, we have seen the importance of the CAP being eroded. It was the key policy objective of various Governments in the history of the EU but now it has slipped to No. 4 in importance. The family farm structure of which we are so proud in rural Ireland is under serious threat and if we do not restore the CAP as a top priority of EU policy that structure, it will disappear.

We can speak about the financial framework and what cuts will come in the budget, but the reality is that since the MacSharry reforms, when we went from price supports to direct payments to farmers, the real value of the payment has dropped enormously. Now, it is proposed to take another €4 billion out of the budget. Over the lifetime of direct payments, their value in real terms has dropped by more than 40%. This is why the average age of our farmers is so high and we do not have youth entering the farming sector. This is the case not only in Ireland, where obviously the importance of our agrifood industry is huge, with €13.6 billion of exports

and 174,000 people employed. The family farm structure is important throughout the EU. We have to reverse this policy and ensure that rural Ireland is protected. It does not really matter whether the cuts are proposed in respect of Pillar 1 or Pillar 2 because family farm incomes are at an extremely low base. Unless we get serious about supporting our family farm structure, rural Ireland and rural Europe as we know them will change forever.

If we do not arrest this change in this financial framework plan, it will be too late. In the past six months, we have seen farmer protests in this country such as we have not seen in a long time. We can argue about convergence and the flattening of payments but the reality is that unless money is put into the CAP, our family farm structure will disappear.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I will share time with Deputies Carthy and Andrews. It was suggested by the European Commission that the next EU budget should have €6.5 billion for military spending. Many of us in this House, as we heard in earlier contributions, oppose this direction. The increased militarisation of the EU and the moves to create a standing army have to be opposed. It is a negative development that undermines Irish neutrality and is the wrong direction for the EU to go. Ireland should remove itself immediately from these plans and should not provide one cent of Irish taxpayers' hard-earned money to PESCO and other EU military projects.

The European Council also discussed the situation in Syria and released a declaration on the fighting in Idlib. We all agree that we have to see an end to the conflict in Syria and a political solution to the crisis through an inclusive peace process for the Syrian people without foreign interference. Disappointingly, the EU's declaration did not mention the fact that Turkey has illegally moved its forces into the region. There was no mention of this in the speeches of the Taoiseach or the Tánaiste. Since the beginning of hostilities, Turkey has repeatedly backed radical jihadist groups in the conflict and has provided assistance to them, which has drawn out the war. It has also attacked the YPG and other Kurdish forces which successfully repelled ISIS and other extreme jihadist groups. Turkey has accused the EU of betrayal for failing to uphold an agreement on Syrian refugees.

Sinn Féin opposed the EU-Turkey deal because it involved transferring billions of EU money to Erdoan's autocratic regime in return for it forcibly stopping refugees seeking asylum. The deal clearly violated international law and the human rights of Syrian refugees. It gave additional powers to President Erdoan and has allowed him to use refugees as pawns as he attempts to extract concessions from his NATO allies. In response to recent military defeats in Syria, Erdoan is doing just this. This has led to appalling scenes and clashes on Greek islands. Greece and Italy were already struggling to process and take care of refugees. Moria refugee camp in Lesbos is a former detention centre with capacity for fewer than 3,000 people. The camp currently has more than 20,000 inhabitants, almost half of whom are children. One child died on Monday after a boat carrying 48 people capsized in Greek waters south of Lesbos. No child should drown in European waters while fleeing violence and seeking safety.

We know that refugees and those who provide assistance to them, for example, volunteer doctors, have been attacked. Inflammatory and militarist language from EU and national policymakers contributes to the risk of violence against people seeking protection and against the organisations and individuals who provide support and show solidarity. Ireland and other EU member states need to mount a collective emergency response and provide humanitarian assistance and humane reception conditions and access to asylum processes for people arriving. This should be through a coalition of all of the countries willing to work together to support

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border countries. There is clearly no need to wait for those unwilling to assist. This is the message I want to send today.

I appeal to Deputies who are interested in what is happening in that part of the world to read the article in the *Irish Examiner* by Caoimhe Butterly. She writes about harrowing scenes and the desperation of people in the camp. She also writes about the sound of children coughing echoing throughout the camp at night. I appeal to people to read the article, after which they might have a different perspective on what is happening to refugees in Europe.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Two years ago, I was present in the European Parliament when the Taoiseach addressed Members on the future of Europe. I feared then that he had handed over a blank cheque, as he was the first European leader to commit to making an increased contribution to the EU budget, and, crucially, he did so without setting out what we would expect in return. Now, we are faced with the prospect of hundreds of millions of euro of additional Irish taxpayers' money going into the EU budget while, at the same time, seeing a reduction in the programmes that are important to our country.

I listened carefully to the Taoiseach's contribution in the hope that lessons had been learned. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The Taoiseach spoke about the Council's budget proposal in the context of how Ireland got a leg-up in respect of EU funds in the past and that we now have a responsibility towards other, perhaps poorer, states. He spoke about the large levels of support that EU membership has among the Irish people. However, the budget proposals from the Council, just like those made by the Commission beforehand, are not about giving a leg-up to poorer states or building on the support for the EU among citizens.

Ask people in Ireland what they support about the EU, then detail the programmes that have benefited the Irish economy and society and compare them with the associated budget lines in the Council's proposals and those in the European Parliament's proposals. The proposals include a 13% reduction in regional development and cohesion, a 27% reduction in social cohesion and values, a 25% reduction in the LIFE Climate Action programme, a 48% reduction in the Erasmus+ programme and a 34% reduction in the Connecting Europe Facility. In addition, we are now faced with a massive cut to the most important budget line for the economy and, in particular, our rural communities, namely, the CAP. While the Taoiseach has spoken about the need to protect CAP, he has not yet been unequivocal in stating he will reject any budget that does not do at least that. In fact, we should demand, at a minimum, that the CAP budget is increased in line with inflation. The family farm is under threat and, therefore, the rural communities that depend on such farms face further decline. CAP is just one of the measures that will play a role in addressing the threat, although it is not the only one. Farmers need fair prices for the goods they produce and an end to the stranglehold of retailers and processors on their sector. They need the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to start treating farmers as partners rather than enemies, and they need a radical rethink of EU trade deals such as the Mercosur agreement. Without a strong CAP, family farming will face an unprecedented crisis and, therefore, the Government cannot and must not support any EU multi-annual financial framework without one.

Listening to the Taoiseach's remarks earlier, I was astounded that he failed to reference the enormous expenditure proposed by the EU for military spending. Some €13 billion was proposed by the Commission and €8.3 billion by the Council for a new budget line that will go directly to the EU arms industry. This is not what the EU should be spending our money on. It is out of tune with the desires of citizens throughout Europe and completely out of sync

with the position of a State that claims to be neutral. The proposition that Irish farmers, Irish communities and European citizens will see cuts in the programmes that make a positive difference while we divert those funds to an EU war machine is something that the Government must reject in the strongest possible terms. We have shown throughout the Brexit process that Ireland can help to shape EU policy in our interests and for the wider good. The people have said time and again that they want Ireland - all of Ireland - to be part of the EU, but they want that EU to serve citizens rather than corporations and vested interests such as the arms industry. That is the vision for a better EU that the next Government must bring to the heart of the debate on the future of Europe.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** The European Council called on all parties in Idlib and wider Syria to “fully respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law and to allow unimpeded and direct humanitarian access to all those in need.” It went on to call for the actors “to be referred to the International Criminal Court”, ICC. While I do not wish to diminish the tragedy that is Idlib and Syria, I think it would be positive to hear the European Council support the case of Israel being referred to the ICC, where it is currently being considered. The ongoing attacks on Palestinian civilians, medical staff and journalists in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are unacceptable. EU support for the ICC to investigate Israel would be the humane and correct step to take. It would be important to see the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and army chiefs and former defence ministers in the dock in the Hague. If this does not happen, international law will be undermined.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I call Deputy Gannon to make his maiden speech. Congratulations, Deputy.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** As this is my maiden speech, it is customary for me to thank the people of Dublin Central who saw fit to send me here. I send them the warmest thanks. It will be through work done in the Chamber and outside it that I hope to validate the trust they placed in me.

I am happy that the first speech I get to make in the Chamber concerns the EU and our relationship with it. Like many Deputies, I am a supporter of our position within the EU. Since we joined in 1973, we have become a fundamentally different, and in many ways better, society. We have become more outward-looking, progressive and confident in who we are. That will become more evident now that our nearest neighbours have departed. We have a greater responsibility to be more assertive, to stand up for ourselves and not be subservient, and to demonstrate on the European stage the very best of what it means to be Irish. I am part of the first generation of Irish people to consider ourselves European. As we approach the negotiations for the new European financial framework, it is important that we assert ourselves and that we remember the values and what we hold dear. Often, such campaigns have to be green-jersey campaigns; they are not a time to take shots at one another unnecessarily. Nevertheless, when we have to, we should be able to stand up for what we believe we should hold dear. As my colleague, Deputy Cairns, noted earlier, it is essential that we stand up against the 14% cuts to CAP. Being a net contributor to the EU can be a source of pride for us. We benefited greatly from the EU and, therefore, it is important that we offer the same opportunities to those neighbours that have joined recently. It is also important in conversations about rebates for the more frugal member states to remember that rebates are a sad legacy of the British and should perhaps be ceased as the British remove themselves from the EU.

When I think about the EU, I think about what it was built on. It was built on the ideals

of shared peace and prosperity. If that shared peace and prosperity is not extended to all, it will leave us in a more vulnerable position. The very ideals of the EU mean we must assert ourselves not only in conversations about the economy, or about how we allocate resources, or about the financial framework, but also in conversations about the Union, which we are a part of. When member states, including Ireland, fail, we should be able to pull one another up on those failings.

We can point to a number of such examples in the Union. One that comes to mind, which has not been mentioned in the debate, relates to the current circumstances in Poland. It is essential that we demonstrate solidarity with members of the LGBTQ+ community in Poland, who are experiencing the injustice of one third of Poland now describing itself as an LGBTQ+ exclusion zone. That is anathema to the Union and the ideals of shared peace and prosperity. Such exclusion zones mean that in one third of Poland, there is a restriction on the sharing of LGBTQ+ literature and information. Furthermore, there have been attacks on members of the community who have engaged in the Pride parade. We have to be vocal about that. There is a reason we have the Cohesion Fund and we commit our shared wealth to building up other nations, but that comes with a responsibility. Rule-of-law caveats are included in the charters of the EU, such as Article 11 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, on freedom of expression and information. The Law and Justice Party in Poland, which has removed that right from the LGBTQ+ community, is in complete violation of that. Article 21 of the same charter, on the non-discrimination of people based on their sex or religion, concerns another right not being afforded to members of the LGBTQ+ community in Poland. If we are to build this Union together, we must demonstrate solidarity with people who do not experience that promised peace in Europe. We need to be vocal, not just by condemning it as the European Council and Parliament have, but by enforcing it in any way we can because it is simply unacceptable.

A point was well made several times earlier about the migration crisis being experienced on the borders of Europe. The conversations in the Chamber that pertain to the migration crisis are appropriate because in Ireland, we are uniquely qualified to talk about migration and the plight of migrants. We are a nation built on migration. Throughout our history when times were bad, we looked overseas and travelled to the US, Britain, Europe and further afield. We were often met with hostility. It is incumbent on who we are and our place in the world that when we see injustice happening to people fleeing their homes because of war, famine or the climate and ecological breakdown that is happening around the world, we demand they are met with compassion and a humanitarian response, but that is not happening. It is not happening on the border between Turkey and Greece or in the Mediterranean, but we cannot close our eyes to that. We have to stand up for those people.

Other injustices are happening in Europe. When we talk about the EU and the threats it faces, we talk about the rise of the far right, the climate crisis and what developments in technology will mean for our place in the world, but other, more bread-and-butter threats that we rarely speak of face the EU. They include the fact that 22.4% of people in the EU live in poverty or at risk of social exclusion. A Union built upon the ideals of shared peace and prosperity cannot exist while 22.4% of its citizens, over 120 million people, are living in such precarious circumstances that mean they are finding it difficult to feed themselves, house themselves and look after their families. If we promise shared peace and prosperity, it must be for everybody, not just the wealthiest cohorts within the Union. That is a fundamental threat to the European Union. If we believe other people's poverty is no business of ours, I ask Members to look across the water to Anglesey, Holyhead and the ports of Wales where over 80% of our HGVs and ex-

ports previously went to. Holyhead is statistically the poorest part of the UK, with an average income of just over £15,000 per annum. Those people, despite being dependent on exports for their existence, voted to leave the European Union because they were not feeling the warmth of Europe. Poverty and exclusion are a threat to the European Union. If we believe ourselves to be involved in this and to be intrinsically connected, we must be able to acknowledge that, seek to confront it and see it as a genuine threat to the fundamental values we hold dear.

I have highlighted the injustices that are experienced throughout the rest of Europe and I want to say we have our own injustices in Ireland also. In my maiden speech, I want to acknowledge the documentary that was on television on Tuesday evening about redress for survivors of institutional abuse. It once again highlighted the failure this State has afforded to victims of institutional abuse and incarceration that happened since the foundation of our State. Whoever takes on the role of Taoiseach must fulfil the promises that were made 20 years ago by former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and in 2013 by former Taoiseach Enda Kenny that we would acknowledge, show respect towards and deliver for people who have experienced those injustices. That has to be a challenge for the next Taoiseach. I am putting this Chamber on notice that this must be the last Dáil where people who have experienced such injustice within our State are neglected. We need to deliver on those promises.

We are not too far away from the Republic that we have promised. Our future is intrinsically connected to the European Union and I look forward to engaging in these discussions in the future and to seeing this Chamber as a place of delivery moving forward.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I congratulate the Deputy on his maiden speech. I call on Deputy Bríd Smith.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I take a certain amount of pleasure in discussing the European Union in a post-Brexit situation because pre-Brexit, People Before Profit in particular, north and south of the Border, was accused of having a pro-Brexit stance because we made criticisms of the European Union. We made criticisms of the European Union on the basis of its militarisation, its policies towards migrants, its bailout that wrecked the Greek economy and its subsequent bailout that wrecked the Irish economy and brought this country into a dreadful state of austerity. The carnage that was wrought on the Greek economy was something the Greek people have paid for and are paying dearly for. I have never heard a word of solidarity with the Greek people from anybody on the opposite benches on enduring the worst austerity imposed on any country in the history of the world.

The hypocrisy the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, showed when he went to the EU the other night and expressed through his tweets his absolute solidarity with the European Union and with what the Greek Government was going through and doing was shameful. It angered me and it angered so many people because what is happening in Greece is not something to be proud of or to show solidarity with. It is barbaric and inhumane and it should be utterly condemned. Deputy Flanagan did not speak for the majority of Irish people. The solidarity of Irish people with refugees and against fascism, war, climate chaos and famine has always been expressed. Even when I was a kid, we constantly collected pennies for what they called the black babies. We never saw them as our enemies or as people to be beaten over the head or drowned in the sea. Even though there have been arguments and protests in this country recently over the location of direct provision centres, in the main the arms of the Irish people were open to those who were misfortunate enough to have lived in Syria through the worst prolonged war on the edge of Europe for a long time and to those who lived in conditions

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of famine, drought and climate change who have been forced to seek refuge in Europe. It is shameful that the Irish Government has expressed solidarity with the behaviour of the Greek Government in this circumstance. If others in this country, whether they are far right fascists or racists, feel they cannot welcome refugees, Deputy Flanagan and this caretaker Government have fed into that idea. They have given them comfort and solace, rather than telling them they are utterly wrong to take a view of showing solidarity with the torturers of desperate people who are being treated barbarically. We should be decrying the behaviour of the Greek Government and the solidarity Europe has shown with it. The Greek Government is acting in breach of its laws, the laws of the European Union and international law. We know Turkey is trying to use the refugees as a bargaining chip but then, as a Government, we endorse the EU paying Turkey millions of euro over the year to house, hold and harbour those refugees, just as we have done in even worse circumstances in Libya. It has been a shameful record. On this side of the House, People Before Profit was critical of the EU for all of those reasons. We were never Brexiteers but we believed a critique of the EU was fair and open. That reality is exposed today and that criticism of the European Union has been vindicated.

I want to read a letter I received from somebody who is directly involved with this crisis. It will take a few minutes but it is an articulate and impassioned letter. I would like people to listen to the details as follow:

I'm writing to urge immediate action and international intervention on the Greek island of Lesbos, in accordance with international and humanitarian law. The Aegean Islands have descended into crisis. Five years of neglectful EU policy has finally culminated in days of strikes and protests, violence, and extreme danger for refugees, volunteers working for NGOs on the islands, and locals. Turkey announced it was opening its border to Europe last weekend, and in response Greece officially decided to suspend the fundamental human right to seek asylum for the next month, as well as deploying major military forces to the border. Neither of these actions is permitted by international law. As the events on Lesbos unfold this Ireland is once again impotent and the silence in our media is deafening. Events since Saturday 29th February 2020 on the island include the following: Local militia mobs have taken to the streets. They are intercepting boats carrying refugees from Turkey to Greece and beating them as they come ashore... The Hellenic Coastguard are no longer responding to boats in distress... Two children drowned this morning off the coast of Lesbos, and many more people have been hospitalised... The Hellenic Coastguard has been filmed driving large boats very fast past refugee dinghies in an obvious attempt to capsize the boats, attacking small boats, or not responding to calls... The violence has turned towards volunteers working for NGOs, demonised as part of the problem. They have been attacked by local Greek groups and beaten... They are now forced to stay inside their houses with lights off, meaning there is no NGO help on shore or in the camps... Locals have made a road block between [two cities where there are major refugee camps] meaning food supplies and medical help cannot get to the camp and the people there are isolated... Last night (1/3/20), the original reception centre for refugees was burnt down and can no longer be used, fostering a climate of fear and violence and sending a clear message to refugees... The Greek Army have today (2/3/20) started a military exercise with LIVE AMMUNITION, shooting towards the area where most of the refugee boats are crossing. This will be ongoing 24/7 until further notice... The first victim of Greek fire — a Syrian man — was killed at the land border this morning by a bullet in the neck... This is not a problem for Greece alone. For too long the international community has been silent, offering no help as it is not physically our shores receiving these people. I am asking for immediate discussion and action in The

Dail and with the wider international community on a solution to move people from the Greek islands to a place of safety for processing in accordance with obligations set out under Article 78(3) of the TFEU and the 2001 Directive on Temporary Protection, recognition of the need for NGOs to continue to act on Lesbos, and the promise of safety and protection for them from the Greek and international security forces while they do this in accordance with Humanitarian Law, an immediate international recognition of and request for a halt to the Greek Army's military action using live ammunition off the coast of Lesbos and at the land border. I remain steadfast in my belief that asylum seekers and refugees have the right to legal processes, and that political irresponsibility can be made good through effective and humane policy governance. Ignorance is no longer an excuse. Europe must act.

I would like the caretaker Minister to explain to us exactly what the Irish Government has done about that. Anything would be better than the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Charlie Flanagan, standing up in Brussels saying "Solidarity" with this kind of behaviour. It is outrageous. It does not represent the sentiment of the Irish people. Something more positive, humane and direct must be done. The message that the Greek Government must stop breaking EU and international law needs to come from this State. Otherwise, we are utter hypocrites.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I call Deputy Neale Richmond to make what I believe is his maiden speech. Congratulations.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Like the previous speaker, Deputy Gannon, as appropriate, I would like to thank very much the good people of Dublin Rathdown for electing me to this Chamber. It is an honour of which I am immensely aware and humbled by, and as long as I am a Member of this House, I hope to serve them to the best of my capabilities.

I am delighted to make my first contribution on this key issue of reflections on the most recent European Council meeting. The European Union, and everything that goes with it, is something I have been passionate about my entire adult life. It is what drove me into working in politics and seeking political office for the Fine Gael Party many years ago.

Three of the key outcomes of this European Council meeting sum up many of the challenges the European Union will face in the coming years both in the short and medium term, but equally in the long term. In the short term, the real challenge facing the European Union, particularly Ireland as a member state within the European Union, is the ongoing Brexit negotiations. It would be remiss of me not to pay credit to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, for the work they have done with Deputies opposite and throughout this Chamber and, importantly, with their partners in the European Union over recent years to garner that level of solidarity in respect of the serious crises Brexit could create for this island and this jurisdiction.

The negotiations have begun between Michel Barnier and Britain's envoy, David Frost, but much more is presenting itself. I welcome the colloquial comments of Commissioner Hogan this morning when he likened the initial exchanges in the negotiations with a bit of argy-bargy in a pre-match tunnel. There will be extremely testing days ahead when we consider some of the reflections in a certain sector of the UK media but especially some of the commentary from British politicians who should know better. However, I firmly believe that an agreement can be reached between the European Union and the United Kingdom that will allow for the least worst Brexit. Ultimately, there is no such thing as a good Brexit for this country and for the

European Union as a whole, but equally there is no such thing as a good Brexit for the United Kingdom.

In the medium term, we look at the discussions over the multi-annual financial framework, MFF. This is where we must act decisively as a changing European Union. We are one of 27 member states - not 28 member states - of a European Union that is reduced significantly with the departure of a large member state that not only contributed so much financially to the workings of the Union and supported many programmes but provided great weight to the work of the European Union to deal with global crises. There are many crises facing this Continent and the world as a whole. We are in the grips of one in respect of Covid-19, which exposes how Ireland, as a small island, cannot work alone, how we are reliant on other members states, and how the UK will be missed. The challenges that the new financial framework presents are great and very different from the challenge the early EEC faced in the 1970s, when Ireland joined as a member, and as it changed during the 1980s and the 1990s.

A number of Deputies opposite expressed their concern about the increase in military spending on defence or research, but we need to acknowledge that things are changing. The militarisation of the world or the threats faced by this country and our partners in the EU are no longer about troops on the ground. It is about the cyber threat. It is about the threat of influencing across social media and online platforms and playing a very dangerous role within the functioning of democracy throughout this country and throughout the European Union. We need to look at the European budget scientifically. There is a gap to be filled.

Like Deputy Gannon, I see it as a great source of pride that we are becoming net contributors. The financial contribution this State has made to the European project cannot be quantified or based against a financial return because the returns are so much greater than sheer monetary value. I would argue that our membership of the European Union has been the single, most transformative act on this island in centuries. It has liberated us socially and economically and has allowed us become a truly sovereign and mature State. We need to reflect on that and the long-term threat towards the European Union, that is, the threat to the existence of the European Union. For the first time, the European project is losing a member state, not just any member state but a large influential member state. We need to look towards the future of the European Union and reflect not only on the speech that French President Macron made some years ago, as referenced by Deputy Martin, but equally on the speech made by the Taoiseach in Strasbourg some years ago about the role the European Union will play in the world and how the European Union will evolve against growing international pressures.

We must look at our own neighbourhood also. We are losing the United Kingdom, which is a very important member state, but what are we gaining? No new member state has joined the EU since Croatia in 2013. We have to acknowledge and accept that applicant countries - accession countries - have been standing on the periphery of this Union for far too long. Have we lost the imagination within the European Union to take those applicant countries and formalise their relationship?

Many people have referred to the actions taking place in Turkey and the worrying threat to democracy sometimes posed by President Erdoan, but we must ask if we in the EU are responsible for that. For how long did we string Turkey along with promises of potential accession to the EU without providing the social and material returns for whatever reforms it might have put in place? We look particularly at the Western Balkans, the former Yugoslavia and those member states that have been looking towards the European Union as a light for the future for

so long. How are we to treat them? Will we be proactive during this Croatian Presidency of the European Council? That is not only the short-term challenge in dealing with our neighbours but the long-term challenge. Will the EU become a closed club of 27 or will we continue to evolve into a potentially wider and deeper entity? I hope that we seek to grow within the European Union.

We are very lucky in Ireland. We have a pro-European population. The latest opinion poll by the European Movement indicates that 93% of the population believe our membership of the EU is a good thing. However, we know that can be fickle and may be reliant on the decision of the UK to depart, because prior to Brexit that number decreased to approximately 86%. If we do not continue to stress the importance of our ongoing membership of the European Union domestically as well as internationally, we run the risk of many people here and further afield taking that for granted. We have to remember how far we, as a member state, have come and the things that my generation take for granted. We can live, work and travel across this Continent without any restrictions or worrying about the need for foreign currency. We know that our rights are protected and that our healthcare needs will be met if we travel throughout this wonderful European Union. We have to remember that that was not always the case. Our friends in the United Kingdom will start seeing things changing greatly for them in the next ten months or a year. We have to make sure that is not the situation for this country.

It behoves all of us in this Chamber and in the other Chamber to make sure that, when we speak about the European Union, we are fair and reasonable and we reflect on not only the opportunities European Union membership can still present to this country but also the responsibilities we have as citizens of this State and as citizens of the European Union as per the Maastricht treaty. We must look at that going forward and use this European Council and the next one to reflect constantly on the short, medium and long-term challenges the European Union faces. I fundamentally believe that the challenges Brexit presents to this State and to the European Union can be overcome. Some opportunities may even be presented, but our single most important strength facing into the challenges of Brexit is our continuing membership of the European Union.

I take this opportunity once again to wish the Minister of State, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste well in however much longer they will be dealing with this process.

*5 o'clock*

I hope we can see out the Brexit process and take the European Union forward in a way that continues to benefit all the Irish people.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I acknowledge the visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to Ireland in recent days and thank them for continuing to build on the friendship between our two countries. The warmth and generosity of spirit being shown to them by the Irish people is appropriate and underlines the close relationship our two islands share. I am sure they are aware of the economic relationships between the UK and Ireland and the challenging conditions that a hard Brexit might create between our two states. It is in our joint interests that Ireland, the United Kingdom and our EU partners should continue working closely together to achieve a managed Brexit that minimises the impact on our trading relationships and does nothing to diminish the respect that has been fostered between our two nations, particularly over recent decades.

5 March 2020

Notwithstanding the importance of our shared ambition, recent media reports indicate a hardening stance by the new UK Government on aspects of its negotiating position with regard to the withdrawal agreement passed by the House of Commons. This House will wish every success for our future trade teams, as well as those of the UK and EU, in arriving at a satisfactory agreement that meets the needs of all concerned. The substance of this new future trading agreement will be a matter of negotiation. It will highlight longer-term political, economic and social challenges for Ireland in our national strategic planning, which at its heart must deliver equity and fairness and secure the future of our vibrant country and its people.

Ireland faces increasing challenges to remain at the forefront of European decision making. Politicians negotiating on our behalf must continue to ensure our open economy remains a European centre, one which embraces advancing world-leading technological change. For Ireland to retain its place as a First World country providing for all her people, we can no longer defer consideration of the social, cultural, environmental and economic shifts we will need to make to future-proof our national competitiveness, thus enabling the advancement of the social prosperity of our people. The technological economy is enlarging with great speed, transforming not only the way we live but also how we work. Many of our standard work practices and work areas are being challenged. Many traditional jobs will disappear in the coming years to be replaced by new opportunities that will require new learning. Industries that are slow to adapt to the use of technology in their manufacturing, innovation and service delivery will be increasingly exposed to international price-led competition. This information age, which is evident all around us, will become completely transformative, increasingly displacing traditional jobs.

The challenging effects of globalisation can be seen in our educational output and the difficulty with retaining and employing those who graduate annually from our third level institutions with significant engineering, technical, scientific and medical competencies. India is an example of a peer country which places great focus on literacy and education and where millions graduate annually as doctors, engineers, scientists, researchers. Many will work in industries that we in Ireland want and need to attract. Unless we continuously resource dynamic and technologically-driven ambition, our economy will fail to grow adequately and will not compete sufficiently to sustain the level of national income necessary to support the needs of our population and meet demographic challenges such as providing adequate reserves for pension needs and elderly care.

In understanding such challenges, we must set policy objectives, particularly in education and future learning that prepare coming generations for success in the world into which they are entering. One such objective is to have a regional, functioning third level education system which delivers courses and graduates to meet the requirements of our advanced employers. It must exhibit regional balance, be based on critical mass and have an ability to scale. Significant opportunity exists through science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics, or STEAM. Along with traditional areas such as history, geography, economics and languages, students can expect to immerse themselves in areas such as big data, artificial intelligence, complex programming, machine-based learning systems, robotic interfaces, etc. They must also become adept in the creation of thought leadership to deliver innovation, problem solve and deliver accelerated learning. Achieving such high ambition will require a step-change in the educational attitude and attainment of our students and third level institutions. The Government must begin to provide substance to such policies.

My constituency of Waterford and the surrounding south-east region has suffered a significant delay in the delivery of a city region university. Many of our school leavers must go

outside the region to access third level courses and many fail to return after graduation, creating a brain drain and forgoing an economic benefit. The lack of investment in Waterford Institute of Technology, which has more than 6,000 undergraduates, over many years has contributed to the regional brain drain and forced a wealth transfer from parents in the south east who struggle to fund student education, including paying for expensive accommodation in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and overseas. Capital investment in the Cork Road campus at WIT was last delivered in 2010, despite significant investment in third level facilities in other regions. An application to build a new engineering building on site at WIT remains unactivated. The project, which awaits build tender approval, would only marginally improve the college's capacity and ability to increase student uptake. Without significant investment in capital structures at WIT and provision of further STEM course opportunity, the idea of regional regeneration through education remains for Waterford and the south east a promise and policy unfulfilled. This is more than unfortunate for the city and region given the vibrant tech and pharma clusters that have been developed over the past 20 years. That these industries are crying out for suitably qualified graduates who should be available within the educational ecosystem of the south east but are not there in number, is a failure that no future Government can allow to continue in the south east or any other region.

As part of regional rebalancing and regeneration, there must be focus on our indigenous small and medium sized enterprises, SMEs. These are our largely Irish owned businesses that employ between ten and 250 people. They are overlooked for enterprise supports as they do not qualify in both micro-enterprise and local enterprise board categories. They cannot access Enterprise Ireland funding if they do not have export-led activity. There is an opportunity for third and fourth level institutions to engage with these companies and explore how they might innovate and adapt to counter the possible downturns of a negative Brexit environment. These SMEs represent one of the largest employment groupings in Ireland. They comprise 54% of all those working in the State, yet bizarrely they are not represented in social partnership discussions. This is a disparity that a future Government must address.

The direction of negotiations regarding Brexit remains a matter of discussion. I welcome the Taoiseach's recently stated position that no diminution of the Common Agricultural Policy, which would significantly affect many in Irish agricultural production, will be accepted. A hard Brexit has always presented a clear and present danger to Ireland. Alongside this, a significant consequence will be the loss of a voting partner for Ireland in future Commission decisions. It is imperative that this House generate momentum for the formation of a new Government, not only to deal with Brexit but also the significant other challenges we face today. We must also immediately begin planning the equitable rebalancing of Ireland.

At its core, policy must secure the future of our indigenous and multinational industries by providing them with opportunities to access the third and fourth level skills and educational supports they require. We must also test and test again policies on housing, healthcare, education, the environment and economic planning to ensure they can deliver a socially just future with opportunity for all.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** A European trading agreement must cover all. Farming needs investment, not cuts, especially where I live in Limerick. Farmers are out in all weather and conditions 365 days of the year. They must maintain their stock. Dairy farmers must get a minimum of 26 cent per litre of milk to be viable. Harsh weather conditions and flooding mean that cattle have been brought indoors earlier than expected. That means fodder is now going down and if they have to buy fodder, it is expensive. Farmers do not need cuts from Europe;

they need more funding. Beef farmers are in the hands of the factories in regard to what they get paid for their produce, which is wrong. If beef farmers lose an animal, they have lost their profit for the year, yet people who go into a hotel or a restaurant pay premium prices for any type of beef or other meat. Again, the person at the end of the chain is the person supplying the food. Everyone in this Chamber eats their produce. Milk, cheese, bread and everything else comes from the farming sector yet farmers are the worst off, especially those who have small landholdings and have to work part-time to keep the farms which have been in their families for generations.

We are the best country in the world for looking after people's culture but we now need to look after our own culture as well. Our farming communities are the ones who have kept food on our tables and kept us fed, through all conditions. We need to invest in farming. A scheme was rolled out in January of this year to improve the position following the catastrophe last year, when calves could not be sold, especially Friesians, because they were making no money. People were giving them away and they were not being taken. A calf investment scheme was introduced but while it was supposed to be rolled out in January to help the farming community, it still has not been rolled out. The calving season is nearly over but farmers have been put under pressure after all the commitments that were given that they would get help this year. Again, it is a failure.

We need to invest in the next generation, invest in our cultures and invest in infrastructure in rural areas. It is not city-based or town-based; it is the whole of Ireland that has to be looked after. We need to invest if we want Ireland to go forward for all of the generations. I come from a farming background. Farming has raised me and my family members. If the farming community is doing well, they invest locally in shops, in machinery and in upskilling on their farms, and they put money into infrastructure within the area. This deal has to favour rural Ireland; it has to favour our farming community. People talk about big farmers but a big farmer has big investments and has to get the staff to work the farm. If we have a harsh winter with low fodder or flooding, it puts farmers under pressure. In all of the guidelines that have been put in place, down to hedge cutting and putting slurry out on a field, everything has been regulated to make it harder and harder for farming communities to work.

We need to look forward. Everyone in this country, no matter who they are, needs to be looked after through a holistic approach. Common sense will have to prevail. Regulations will have to be relaxed to help communities in rural Ireland, including rural Limerick. All of the schemes and regulations in our areas, whether for educational or environmental issues, are set out to close down rural Ireland. When people sit down at their tables tonight to have something to eat, they should think where the produce is coming from. When they look out the window and see rain, snow or harsh conditions, they should think where the food is coming from. No matter whether somebody is a vegan or otherwise, all of their food is produced in rural Ireland, which should be looked after. What I want today is a commitment from all of the people in government that we will holistically look after the whole of Ireland and stop making regulations and stipulations which are closing us down.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** This is not my maiden speech but it is my first speech in the Thirty-third Dáil. I start by thanking the people of Sligo-Leitrim for electing me to this House and, like every other Deputy, I cannot wait to get stuck in.

When I looked to my right a few minutes ago, I saw Deputy Matt Carthy, and it was precisely the same in the European Parliament. It is interesting that both of us should be here. In

that context, while he is not of my party, I take this opportunity to wish Chris MacManus, a fellow Sligo man who is replacing Deputy Carthy in the European Parliament, the very best. He represents all of us and I wish him well.

Another point which I find unusual is that I have ten whole minutes to speak. I am not sure I will fill that time because it was one or, at most, two minutes in the European Parliament.

As a former MEP, it is interesting that my first opportunity to speak in Dáil Éireann is on the European budget, but this time from the other side of the fence, as it were. One of the issues for discussion at the European Council was the MFF, or budget, which is approximately €1.9 trillion. It seems a lot of money but, in fact, it is about 1% of what member states spend. The whole idea of the budget is that by acting collectively, whether on CAP, the social fund, the regional fund or climate change, we add value.

One of my main concerns around the new EU budget is the proposed cut to CAP. The Taoiseach said earlier today that we cannot ask farmers to do more regarding climate action and pay them less. In this country, we operate farm to fork and we have strict regulations around pesticides, animal health and the delivery of public goods. The new green deal will impose significant further requirements on farmers and unless they are paid, they will go out of business. We heard earlier today about Mercosur and the possibility of significant tonnage of tariff-free beef entering the EU and, of course, the possibility of real market disturbance under Brexit. Therefore, it is easy to see that agriculture is in an extremely precarious position and, at the very least, the most basic safety net is an adequately funded CAP.

As I said, however, I am now on the other side of the fence. The share-out of moneys at national level is of crucial importance to farmers, particularly those who farm in that part of the country I represent. The current Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine said that convergence will pause during transition. That is unfair and unjust. Convergence is a process that must be ongoing. Many EU countries have full convergence and the Commission proposes up to 75%, whereas Ireland is still at 60%. Full convergence would deliver about €10 million per annum for farmers in Sligo and Leitrim and about €13 million for those in Donegal, so it is a hugely significant contribution to the local economy. We currently have what is known as the Irish model, which, of course, was put in place under the Irish Presidency. However, it is not serving parts of the country well because we are still using production levels from 2000 to determine current payments, which makes no sense.

An equally crucial issue is that of the eco-schemes within Pillar 1. It is proposed that they will have 30% of the budget. Right now, we have farmers implementing precisely the same greening measures on grassland throughout the entire country but getting paid different amounts for doing the same work. For example, farmers can be paid as little as €50 per hectare or as much as €210 per hectare for doing precisely the same work and having the same requirements. This is completely unjust. A flat rate payment for all farmers would be approximately €80 per hectare. We must ensure this is part of the new CAP when we agree it in this House. This situation was unfair on day one and is still unfair. The new eco-schemes will impose significant requirements on all farmers. It is imperative that all farmers are paid equally for their equal work. It would be unthinkable that farmers in different parts of Ireland would be discriminated against on this basis.

On CAP, the last time out we did not fully co-fund Pillar 2. I understand there were economic reasons, etc., for this but that must be reversed this time.

Another area of real concern to the part of the country I represent is the fact that the Border, midlands and western, BMW, region has been downgraded from a developed European region to one that is in transition. This is because of a fall in our growth and wealth levels, etc. I can hardly believe it is nearly 25 years since I was involved in the Objective One campaign, which eventually resulted in the BMW region being on the same level as the south and east region. It has now been downgraded. A recent report by the northern and western regional assembly has shown the chronic, consistent under-investment in the region. That must be rebalanced in order that we can have regional development. This must be addressed by the next Government. From a European perspective, we must utilise fully any extra funding and whatever flexibility around state aid, etc., that is there to bridge the gap. We have to be proactive. It is fine that there is some flexibility on state aid, but we must use it proactively.

I am encouraged to see that the European Investment Bank has up to €2.5 trillion available for projects on climate action. The next Government must take full advantage of this facility to put in place climate action measures. Some of this will be for a just transition for workers in the midlands and elsewhere, and where appropriate, for creating new jobs in the green economy.

I have some real concerns around the €13 billion for security and defence. I hear the argument made from the other side of the House that it is not necessarily about arms, etc. This is very thin ice for Ireland and I have concerns. I also regret the cuts proposed to the European budget. I support what seems to be an all-party or many-party stance in this House that we would be open to increasing our contributions in order that the European budget can fulfil some of its objectives. At home, we have to take every opportunity afforded to us by the European budget, both in terms of flexibility offered and spending.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We will now have 20 minutes of questions and answers. I ask Deputies to indicate whether they wish to speak. We have three Members offering. I will try to allow everybody to speak. I call Deputy Seán Haughey.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** We have had a long debate. I would like to ask the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, about the upholding of European values and ideals and the rule of law I mentioned earlier in my contribution. What is the position regarding the proliferation of LGBT exclusion zones in Poland? There has also been the undermining of an independent judiciary and free media in Hungary. Ireland has spoken out about these developments. Will the Minister of State update the House on what exactly is happening at European Council level or in other committees of the EU? Is firm action going to be taken on these issues in these countries? I would appreciate an update on the position at this stage.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I am unsure if we will be discussing this issue later. Has the Minister for Health been in contact with or met his European counterparts? Are EU-wide health meetings planned? One of the issues to have been brought up is the possible cancellation of flights and travel to certain regions in Europe, particularly in northern Italy. Has this been discussed at EU level? Is there a possibility that borders might be closed and travel stopped?

The Tánaiste said he was heading off on a flight to Zagreb to meet foreign ministers. When one goes on aeroplanes nowadays, they are filthy. These are just basic matters. Will extra responsibilities be placed on airlines in respect of the threat that is facing people who are travelling? As we know, aeroplanes are not just carriers of people but also of diseases. Will there be a different approach to this now?

On the EU-British trade talks, the British Government appears to be attempting to renege on its commitment to its future relationship with the EU. Will the Minister of State confirm that the interim Government will not allow this to happen? Does she agree it is essential that the protections agreed in the Irish protocol of the withdrawal agreement are maintained and implemented? The political consensus in the Dáil on this matter should continue. We all understand that the peace process, the Good Friday Agreement and the all-island economy must be protected in any future agreement. Was this raised with our counterparts at the February meeting?

On the CAP question, which is not my area, the current proposals would make many Irish farms unviable and would have a devastating effect on farmers and rural Ireland. Alongside this, Irish farmers need to contend with the EU-Mercosur deal that is coming down the tracks. Will the Minister of State confirm that the interim Government will fight against attempts to cut the CAP massively?

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I have two questions for the Minister of State.

Earlier today, I heard Deputy McDonald speak positively about Martina Anderson's contribution on Brexit. She made a positive contribution, as many Irish MEPs have done. When I sat in the European Parliament in Brussels, I was proud of the contribution the Irish Government made on the issue of Brexit. I am happy to put that on the record. What is the view at European level on Boris Johnson's statement that if things are not basically concluded by June, his Government will pull out of the negotiations? I will not repeat Deputy Crowe's question on the Irish protocol.

My second question is on whether Ireland has a bottom line on the CAP budget. Is it all in the mix for now?

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I wish to ask two questions. The first follows the points made by Deputy Harkin on the ongoing negotiation process between the EU and the UK. Can the Minister of State outline a timetable by which the European Council can expect updates on progress from the EU chief negotiator, Mr. Michel Barnier? In a speech today or yesterday he identified four areas where there is difficulty and how they might be approached. My second question relates to the MFF and timelines. Can the Minister of State indicate when the European Council might be able to agree the MFF or outline when the Irish Government hopes that will be achieved?

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. I dtús báire ba mhaith lion Seachtain na Gaeilge shona a ghuí ar gach duine. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí ar fad as ucht a gceisteanna. Is iomaí ábhar ata luaite acu agus déanfaidh mé mo dhícheall iad ar fad a fhreagairt. B'fhéidir go dtosóidh mé leis na ceisteanna maidir leis an gCreat Airgeadais Il-bhliantúil, an MFF, given the fact that this is what the European Council and the overall discussion today is about. I will start by wishing everyone here a happy Seachtain na Gaeilge. I will try to answer all the questions in the best way I possibly can.

Regarding the MFF, a lot of the discussion has been in respect of the CAP. Deputy Harkin is right in stating that there is a unified position on the CAP proposals. There are some in Europe who feel that a smaller EU should mean a smaller budget. With the UK leaving, we are looking at a hole worth between €65 billion and €70 billion. However, as Deputy Richmond rightly pointed out, while it may be a smaller EU now, we hope that it will get larger again. There have been discussions on the enlargement process and opening up the accession negotiations

for North Macedonia and Albania. We have new and competing priorities as well as more traditional priorities such as the CAP. We have consistently said that we are willing to pay more, but that is not at the expense of traditional policies like the CAP. I refer also to the Cohesion Fund, from which we have benefited hugely in the past, and other policies including those relating to Horizon, Erasmus and climate action, which is a priority for most Members here.

We know how much the CAP benefits Irish farmers. It provides employment for 180,000 people, which represents approximately 7.7% of our overall workforce, and contributes in the region of 7.5% of our GNI. That has an extremely important knock-on effect, providing safe, easily accessible and cheap food, protecting our environment and protecting our rural towns, villages and local economies. This is why we have consistently stated - we did so as recently as a week and a half ago when an extraordinary meeting took place to try to reach an agreement on the MFF - that we would not be accepting the current proposals. A new negotiating box was presented which suggested further changes in the form of an increase of 2% for Pillar 1 and a reduction of 8% in respect of Pillar 2. There was further flexibility between both pillars, but this would result in a loss of hundreds of millions of euro for Irish farmers. This is something we simply cannot accept.

There have been suggestions from some Deputies that while the CAP budget is decreasing we will spend more funding on security and defence. The overall suggested figure for security and defence is 1.3% of the overall budget. The overall suggested figure for the CAP is 30% of the overall budget. While it is not enough, it is still a significant amount. We must ensure that this figure increases even more.

Regarding EU values, it has been suggested that the new MFF should include conditionality mechanisms to be applied where member states are in breach of the rule of law. This would apply to all member states in the same way. This is something we fully support. This mechanism would be new to the MFF. I hope it would take into account a lot of the concerns that member states have had around some of the countries that have been mentioned here, such as Poland and Hungary. The General Affairs Council, which met last week and which I attended, did not go into detail on the rule of law. However, we will be having further discussions when the General Affairs Council meets again in two weeks. The rule of law will be on the agenda and I will be raising some of the concerns Deputies have raised here. We have had several hearings on Poland through the Article 7 process. While we have seen progress in certain areas, we have also seen regression in certain areas. New mechanisms, separate to the MFF, have been proposed by the European Council. These will not duplicate the Article 7 process. We hope these will enable progress in certain areas. I share Deputies' grave concerns on some of the new issues which have been raised, particularly regarding the LGBT community. This is not something that we should be accepting within the European Union and it is certainly something I will be raising with my colleagues.

Regarding the coronavirus and Ministers with responsibility for health, my understanding is that there is will be a meeting of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council configuration, EPSCO, tomorrow. I am not sure whether Ministers are travelling or whether it will be carried out by means of videoconferencing. I know that Finance Ministers spoke about this issue in a teleconference yesterday and the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, has met many of his European colleagues to discuss how we can protect all of our citizens. Any of the advice we are taking is being replicated in other member states, particularly when it comes to travel. A Deputy asked how we can advise against travelling to certain regions but not offer advice to those who are coming from those regions. We can only offer advice to our own

citizens. We can only give our own view, based on medical evidence, of the best thing to do. Telling individuals not to travel to certain regions has not been welcomed by the countries concerned but we felt it was the right thing to do to protect public health. This was not discussed at the European Council meeting we are discussing today, but I expect that it will be a topic of discussion at the European Council at the end of March.

Regarding Brexit and the overall discussions, I have been in the Chamber since Mr. Michel Barnier and the UK Government gave their presentations today. However, I very much welcome the confirmation by the UK and Mr. Barnier that they will uphold and adhere to everything that was agreed in the Irish protocol. That is extremely important from our point of view. I have also been informed that an oversight committee will be put in place to oversee the implementation of the protocol. This body will not change what has already been agreed in any way. It concerns the implementation of the protocol. It is due to meet on 30 March. There will be representatives from Ireland, Northern Ireland, the UK and the EU. We will receive regular updates. Regarding updates on overall progress, Mr. Barnier met the General Affairs Council a week and a half ago. He will continue to update us regularly in the same manner. I do not think a timeline has been set, but he will continuously update us as he sees fit. Regarding the possibility of reneging on the protocol, given the fact that this is international law we expect the UK to fulfil its obligations and it has made that commitment today. We will certainly be keeping an eye on that.

There were questions on timelines for the MFF. Many people would have liked to reach an agreement at the previous Council meeting. Such an agreement is probably some way off at this stage. The matter is not on the agenda for the March European Council meeting, although I thought it might be. That might change depending on the level of engagement between President Charles Michel and the member states. The sooner we can get it implemented the better. It needs to go before the European Parliament, which cannot amend or change what is put before it but can reject it. Given the fact that the Parliament's preferred overall figure was 1.3% of GNI and the current proposals are at 1.074%, there will be difficult conversations between the Parliament and the Council. The sooner we have those conversations the better.

I was asked if we have a bottom line on the CAP. The Taoiseach has clearly stated that we cannot accept the proposals that have been put forward. We cannot accept paying more if our farmers are going to get less. That is not going to change.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** We all touched on the refugee crisis. Has the Tánaiste been in touch with his Greek counterpart? I heard him state that he was trying to get broad agreement on responses to the crisis but I do not think he will do so. Is there a view on what can be done by those who are willing to help? We have seen the shocking scenes. There is a crisis there and it will get worse. We need to do something. We need to stand in support of the refugees but also to support the Greek people who are facing this huge challenge. I do not think anyone wants to see the scenes we are seeing on television, the attacks on refugees, the firing of live ammunition and people being assaulted and tear gassed. What can we as a country do?

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** The Tánaiste touched on a lot of this but I will reiterate what he said. I share Deputy Crowe's concerns and the concerns that have been expressed by most Deputies who have spoken. It was not outlined in the Taoiseach's speech because it was not an item on the agenda but that is why the Tánaiste in particular wanted to raise this issue. He has consistently showed solidarity and called for a de-escalation of the conflict in Syria, in particular in recent weeks given the fact that we have seen more than 1 million people displaced

since December alone. I do not think it is about showing solidarity with one group of people over another and that is why we have consistently shown solidarity not just with our European colleagues in Greece, Bulgaria and those other countries in front-line situations where they are struggling to deal with the amount of people who are coming across their shores but also showing solidarity with those in Syria, in Idlib, and those who have been displaced. Financially, we have contributed €114 million since 2012. Last year alone, we contributed €25 million to try to ease and support those who are currently still in Syria. What we need to try to do is come together to form a consensus but that is not something we have been able to do. Every time I have spoken about this I have spoken about my frustration in this area. We cannot reach an agreement or consensus when it comes to setting a clear path forward. There were dissenting views on whether some should financially contribute or take in more refugees. We have always opted in where it has not been forced upon us. The figure of 4,000 might not seem like a lot but that is what was asked of us through the process that has been put in place. The Tánaiste already outlined that we have taken in 3,151 out of that 4,000. The Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, committed recently to take a further 2,900 refugees. We will fulfil those commitments. This is about trying to put in place a system that works.

I again stress that the agreement between the EU and Turkey in 2016 needs to be upheld because we have seen how that has helped to stem the flow of migration but we also need to make sure that those who are still being forced to move, irrespective of whether an agreement has been put in place, are protected and that the humanitarian assistance and aid is provided for them but that we are addressing the root cause, that is, why people are being forced to flee their homes and towns in the first place. That is a matter on which we have not seen huge progress. This week alone, the Tánaiste, with 13 other member states, highlighted their concern and asked for a de-escalation in Syria, in particular by those who are supporting the Syrian regime. We must do what we can to support our Greek colleagues because they have a right to protect their borders but there is an obligation on all of us to protect those who are fleeing war and persecution. I do not think any of us would like to find ourselves in those positions. The situation is very difficult and complex but we have been consistent in providing financial support and calling on people to do the right thing.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Tá na ceisteanna críochnaithe. Five minutes have been provided to wrap up the debate, but doing so is optional.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I thank Members from across the House for their contributions. The cross-cutting nature of the MFF means that it impacts on a wide range of policy areas and political priorities, not just for member states across the Union but also for parties and groupings in this House. As the Taoiseach has noted, there is further work to be done to finalise the MFF package. There remain differences between those member states favouring a smaller budget, and those arguing for a larger budget. There are also differing views on how the proposed funding is balanced between long-standing and successful policies such as CAP and cohesion and newer priorities.

President Michel and leaders across the EU are reflecting on the recent summit and will return to these discussions in due course, but we do not have a date for that discussion. The European Parliament is also required to give its consent to the new European budget after agreement is reached by the Council. We have stated clearly our openness to increased contributions to the new budget, once existing policies such as CAP are properly resourced and European added value is demonstrated.

We must remember the value of EU membership in these discussions around the budget and Exchequer contributions. For example, Ireland has benefitted hugely from membership of the Single Market. We have also seen the solidarity shown to Ireland in recent years, in particular in relation to Brexit. There is strength in unity. Only together can we address the big issues that matter to citizens across the EU, in particular, issues such as climate change. In this regard, we support the mainstreaming of climate action within the budget and are open to President Michel's suggestion to increase the capital available to the European Investment Bank to support investment in climate action. The inclusion of peat areas such as the midlands within the scope of the recently proposed EU just transition fund is very welcome in providing support to those regions most impacted.

We are also very supportive of a strong PEACE PLUS programme, as a tangible demonstration of the EU's continuing support for cross-Border co-operation under the Good Friday Agreement. We very much welcome the fact that the proposal by the Finnish Presidency to increase that to €100 million has been maintained in the current negotiating box. This is particularly important in the context of Brexit as well as the recent restoration of the power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland.

The Taoiseach also set out Ireland's well-established position on the need to protect the CAP, as have all Deputies in the Chamber this evening. It is a long-standing and well-functioning policy and is a vital support for rural communities, farming families and in providing food security. We cannot ask farmers to do more for climate, sustainability and food security with substantially less funding. Farmers are low income earners across the EU and they are highly dependent on CAP direct payments. In Ireland, these account for 74% of family farm incomes. At EU level, the CAP maintains up to 10.8 million family farms. It also manages some 40% of the land area of the EU, around 175 million ha. It ensures the EU is self-sufficient in food production, that it is a world leader in sustainable agriculture and that it delivers the highest standards of food safety, animal health and animal welfare. We will continue to make the case for the CAP as the negotiations progress. While it is not currently envisaged that the European Council meeting in March will discuss the MFF, it will be reverted to in the coming weeks.

As has been noted already, the special meeting of the European Council also agreed a declaration on the situation in Idlib in light of the renewed military offensive by the Syrian regime and its backers. I share my deep concern at the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib and with the migration situation developing at the EU's external borders with Turkey. This is an issue foreign ministers will discuss when they meet in Zagreb tomorrow.

### **Coronavirus: Statements**

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** I very much welcome the opportunity to update the House on the ongoing situation relating to Covid-19, coronavirus. I begin by sincerely thanking colleagues for what has been real cross-party and cross-grouping co-operation. On the floor of this House today I commit to continue to keep Members of this House briefed, but more than that: we will hear from them, interact with them and ensure their input is useful in that regard. As the Taoiseach outlined in the House, I intend to put a structure in place to ensure that we can further strengthen the cross-party work, acknowledging the political interregnum that currently exists.

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This is a time of national and international challenge and it does require us all to pull together. I know that currently in Ireland a lot of people are worried and concerned. I know that parents in particular are receiving a lot of information and sometimes it can be hard to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong, what is appropriate and what is not. I also know the coronavirus is the subject of lots of discussions among teachers in schools, among students in the playground, around the dinner table and in the workplace. People are following social media and at times they can be exposed to myths and misinformation about coronavirus. I strongly encourage all people to take their advice from public health doctors, to listen to doctors and medical experts, to follow the HSE advice and, crucially, to trust public health doctors who have one sole focus, that is, to contain this virus and protect people.

We will continue to provide all the information we can and we are continuing to develop our communications material. It is important to know that the vast majority of people who contract this virus will not need hospital care but can be treated at home. Some people believe that everybody who gets this virus will require hospitalisation, but that is not the case. It is also important to know that, currently, the likelihood of person-to-person transmission in Ireland is low. These words of reassurance do not mean we are not taking this matter extraordinarily seriously; of course we are. I continue to emphasise that this is not a time for panic or complacency.

I assure the House that our approach to this challenge is, and will remain, both vigilant and proportionate. I reassure Deputies of the considerable effort being undertaken in my Department, led by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, and by the HSE and its public health experts, to contain and respond to this serious public health threat and to mitigate the consequences across society. As people are aware, Covid-19 poses a very serious public health threat, not just here in Ireland but across the globe.

I wish to provide an update on the current situation nationally. Last Saturday, 29 February, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre was informed of the first confirmed case of Covid-19 in Ireland. A second case was notified on Tuesday last, 3 March. Both of these cases are in the east of the country. As the House will now be aware, last night the Health Protection Surveillance Centre was informed of four new confirmed cases of Covid-19. These cases are in the west. All of the patients involved - they are receiving appropriate medical care - were identified and tested in line with established protocols for the investigation of suspect cases of Covid-19. I can confirm that the confirmed cases in Ireland are all associated with travel from affected areas in northern Italy rather than contact with other confirmed cases. There is still no evidence of widespread or sustained community transmission in Ireland, as has been seen in other countries. The HSE is working to identify contacts the patients may have had, to provide them with information and advice on how to prevent further spread.

None of the patients has been named publicly by the Department of Health or HSE, nor will they ever be, in order to protect patient confidentiality. This is essential to ensure all members of the public that they can have confidence that their privacy will be protected should they wish to report any matters to our health service. In fact, an effort not to protect this privacy, particularly on social media, has been rather disgusting and despicable. We need people to come forward when they have symptoms, to identify themselves and co-operate with our public health service. Anything that lessens trust or confidence is not helping in terms of containing the virus here or globally.

Deputies can rest assured that the contact-tracing protocols operated by the HSE comprise a proportionate and adequate response to responding to these matters. We have been working

very closely with the public health authorities in Northern Ireland on all these matters. Public health authorities have activated all appropriate contact-tracing protocols. I signed the Infectious Diseases (Amendment) Regulations 2020 on Thursday, 20 February in order to make provision for Covid-19 to be added to the list of notifiable diseases so doctors who are at the front line of our response to the virus will be obliged to notify the HSE when a case is suspected or diagnosed and will be able to take appropriate action to respond to the very serious public health threat posed by the Covid-19 virus. There has been a notable increase in the number of cases tested, from 90 to 397, in one week but there has been no community transmission recorded yet. With regard to capacity in our health service, we have now approved an additional 20 intensive care unit beds. The chief executive of the health service outlined these today. Further plans are in place for more in this regard.

Efforts to contain the virus are continuing. I reiterate the advice of the Chief Medical Officer to the effect that central to this is that people know what to do in the event that they have symptoms. That is really the message we have to get out. The general public is advised to follow advice from the HSE and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre.

Turning to the international context, as Deputies will be aware, on 30 January 2020, the WHO declared that the outbreak of Covid-19, or coronavirus, as it is known, originating in Wuhan, China, met the criteria for a public health emergency of international concern in accordance with the provisions of the international health regulations. Ireland is guided in its response to emerging international public health incidents by the advice and protocols of the WHO and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC. As the situation evolves, we continue to work with our international partners, including the WHO and the ECDC, the other member states of the European Union and the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. I will attend a meeting in Brussels tomorrow where the health Ministers of the EU will have the opportunity to take stock of the current situation and measures already taken in order to find the best approach for a co-ordinated response to the current spread of Covid-19 in the EU. We need that co-ordinated European and global response.

In line with our national emergency-management structures, the National Public Health Emergency Team, chaired by the Chief Medical Officer, has been meeting regularly regarding the Covid-19 outbreak. The team is the forum for managing the interface between the Department of Health and the HSE during the planning and response phases of a public health emergency such as the one we now face. As part of its continuous assessment of Ireland's response and preparedness to Covid-19, the National Public Health Emergency Team, at its meeting on 3 March 2020, recommended a number of further measures. These include an update to the travel advice for Italy to advise against all non-essential travel to the regions of Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and Piedmont. Mass gatherings guidelines are to be published in the coming days following discussion with stakeholders. The HSE is now moving to a community-testing model for assessment and investigation of suspect cases so everything does not need to be done in a hospital setting. Importantly, four sub-groups have been established to support and provide advice in the following areas: vulnerable people with underlying health conditions or older people; health and social care workers' protection; acute hospital preparedness; and continuity of supply of medicines and medical devices. I am particularly pleased to inform the House that a meeting with patient advocacy groups will take place in my Department tomorrow. An expert advisory group provides scientific advice and assistance to the national public health emergency team in carrying out its work.

We are acutely aware that while there are significant health consequences posed by the

Covid-19 virus, this also impacts more widely on society and poses threats to the functioning of our economy and country. Issues such as port health, travel advice, contingency planning, communications as well as advice and guidance to various sectors, including the public, have been discussed and are being kept under constant review. In response to this, the Government has now established a new Cabinet committee, chaired by the Taoiseach, to assess the social and economic impacts of the potential spread of Covid-19. The work of the Cabinet committee will include addressing the impacts, mitigation measure and contingencies for cross-sectoral issues that arise in areas beyond the health service, building on the effective public health work undertaken to date. A whole-of-Government approach to the coronavirus response requires cohesive decision-making, a partnership approach, expert public health advice and clarity of communications. The Government also endorsed the establishment of a stakeholder forum. The forum is the mechanism through which engagement with civil society, employers, social partners, local leaders, voluntary groups and others will be progressed and will ensure that are kept informed of developments, what assistance they can provide and raise awareness of the appropriate responses to the challenges posed by Covid-19.

I would also like to take the opportunity to inform the House of a few issues arising beyond the health sector. In doing so, it is worth pointing out that the websites of Departments and agencies are being updated regularly as the situation evolves. For anybody considering travel to other countries, the website of the Department of Foreign Affairs provides travel advice, which is updated as the need arises. The Government is monitoring the situation with our agencies, ports and airports. Airports and sea ports are following the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team and are in continual direct liaison with the HSE through the port health group. The Government is mindful that any sustained period of significant flight restrictions would lead to very significant impacts on tourism and businesses, and is in regular contact with tourism industry leaders.

The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, and the Minister of State at his Department, Deputy Griffin, convened a meeting of their Covid-19 tourism monitoring group on 26 Feb to monitor the disruption to the sector. This group met again this week and will meet weekly, as necessary. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has also been in contact with public transport operators, and a meeting was organised between the National Transport Authority, transport operators and the HSE on 3 March. From a business, trade and labour perspective, the outbreak of Covid-19 is already having an impact.

As the House knows, the Taoiseach announced earlier that the Government recognises that employees who need to self-isolate in accordance with medical advice should receive income support. We know this will require flexibility and responsiveness by employers and in Government social protection schemes. Following consultation with employers and trade union representatives, proposals will be considered at the Cabinet committee next Monday.

The Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Humphreys, and her Department are working on a range of supports and providing inputs across a number of areas impinging on Irish business, for example, in regard to supply chains. The Department and the development agencies, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and our local enterprise offices, are actively assessing and working with affected firms, both in overseas markets and in manufacturing businesses here at home. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has updated advice to business on continuity planning that includes a practical checklist, to which I draw businesses' attention, as well as links to relevant Covid-19 advice. This, in turn, is being shared by business representative bodies with their members and will help companies to assess

risk and consider preparatory actions to respond. Additional engagement with business representative bodies, including the retail and grocery sector, is ongoing.

The Department of Education and Skills, under its Minister, Deputy McHugh, has published a range of useful information, including posters, guidance documents and videos, all of which are available on its website.

*6 o'clock*

I realise that in the time available I have only been able to touch on a brief range of activity happening right across the Government, but I urge all those interested to check the websites of our Government Departments and agencies for comprehensive, up-to-date information. We will continue to push out those messages through the stakeholder forum.

Ireland remains in containment phase. The Chief Medical Officer will update the public, this House and the media every evening regarding the current situation. That is an appropriate forum to have in place so the people of Ireland get to hear daily from our Chief Medical Officer. Our current focus is on identifying and isolating any possible cases and ensuring rigorous infection prevention and control and contact tracing procedures are in place. However, the absolute truth is that circumstances are constantly evolving. We are learning more about this virus day by day and sometimes hour by hour.

I understand just how anxious and concerned people are about this outbreak, but it is important to reiterate that if people are not in an area where Covid-19 is spreading, have not travelled from an area where Covid-19 is spreading or have not been in contact with an infected patient, the risk of infection is low. We will continue to communicate key public health messages to keep people informed and up to date on all matters. Very good information is available on the HSE website about simple measures we can all take to help to protect ourselves, our families and people in our workplaces and to minimise the spread of the virus. I urge everybody, including those of us in here, to lead by example in familiarising ourselves with that available advice.

I trust Deputies will join with me in paying tribute to our health service personnel, our doctors, our nurses, our ambulance staff, our paramedics, our care workers and all of those working on the front line in response to Covid-19. These people are working flat out and have been for some significant time. We need to acknowledge that. I hope the information I have set out this evening will be helpful in understanding the utmost seriousness with which the Government is treating this situation and our willingness, desire and requirement to work with the Oireachtas in that regard.

I urge all of us at this time to recognise the potential severity of this moment for our country and the need to ensure we all act in support of our public health officials in their work. This is a public health emergency. Our response to that emergency can only be guided by the best international evidence and advice available. Therefore, I again thank all the Deputies here for working with us collaboratively as we focus our efforts in the immediate future on minimising the impacts on our country and our society. I very much appreciate the support of all as we work hard to balance the continuation of everyday activities with simultaneously taking all appropriate public health measures to limit the spread and impact of this virus.

Although we may not yet have a new Government, since the recent election we have a new Dáil - the Thirty-third Dáil. I hope I speak for all the Members of this House when I say to the people of Ireland that all Deputies, regardless of whether they are in government or in opposi-

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tion, are united in doing our utmost to protect our country in the face of this threat. Go raibh maith agaibh.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am sharing the short time available with the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh. I assure the House that the Covid-19 outbreak is receiving careful attention across the Government. As we learn more about the virus, we will continue to take actions that are proportionate and based always on medical advice. For some time, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has been dealing with the implications of the Covid-19 virus for Irish citizens overseas. Staff at our embassies and consulates on the ground and here in Dublin are providing extensive consular advice and assistance to citizens in affected areas across the globe. As always, we encourage our citizens to register their details on our citizens' registration facility, which is available on the Department's website. This will help us to contact people travelling and enable us to provide assistance in the event of a crisis such as this one.

We are working closely with our EU partners and other like-minded countries and with the World Health Organization, which is leading global efforts to control the spread of this virus and mitigate its impact, particularly in countries with weaker health systems. We have already contributed more than €1 million in support of these efforts. We are also working with the Department of Health, of course, and other relevant Departments and agencies in Ireland and internationally to ensure all appropriate advice and precautions are in place. Our dedicated advice line, which was activated on 25 February, will remain open at 01 6131733. More generally, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade issues travel advice in respect of over 200 countries. This is available on the Department's website and on our Travelwise app, which provides advice for staying safe and information when abroad. I encourage everyone to download the app and to take out travel insurance before travelling overseas.

Over the past two weeks, due mainly to the Covid-19 outbreak, we have updated our travel advice in respect of over 100 countries. We have raised the overall security status in respect of China and Iran. We are now advising against non-essential travel to regions of South Korea. We have given further details about local developments in Japan and Singapore. Based on advice from medical experts, and in line with many EU partners, we upgraded our advice for Italy on 3 March, which was earlier this week. We are now recommending against non-essential travel to the four affected regions of northern Italy. We will continue to review and update our travel advice and to provide consular support and assistance to all our citizens overseas.

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom aitheantas a ghabháil leis na príomhoidí uile, na tuismitheoirí, na daltaí scoile, na déagóirí agus an méid scoileanna atá i gceist maidir leis an tionchar suntasach atá i gceist leis na cásanna Covid-19. Chomh maith leis sin, ba mhaith liom aitheantas a ghabháil leis na daoine uile fá choinne na ceannaireachta agus na n-oifigí uile sa Rialtas agus sa Roinn Sláinte agus mo Roinn féin as na rudaí suntasacha atá bainte amach ag an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna as ucht an fhreagra éifeachtaigh, suaimhnigh agus chiúin uathí.

The Department of Education and Skills is in ongoing contact with the schools impacted by the closures to provide support to the school community. The Chief Medical Officer has provided guidance addressing key areas of concern for school staff, students and parents. The Department and schools will continue to be advised by medical experts on these matters. Over recent weeks, the Department of Health, the HSE and the Department of Education and Skills

worked closely together to ensure we had structures in place to respond if this virus reached our shores. Officials from both Departments and the HSE are in constant communication to ensure that we continue to communicate with our education stakeholders as the situation evolves, and that where there is an impact on a school community, the school is informed as soon as possible and supported throughout the process.

All schools, education centres and the education partners have been provided with guidance and information, including child-focused information posters and videos on appropriate hygiene practices. Information for education settings, in consultation with the HSE, is being updated continuously on the website of the Department of Education and Skills and disseminated to schools, education settings and the education partners. There is no need for any school to close unless it is advised to do so by the HSE. A decision to close should be taken on specific public health advice only. It is important that schools and communities follow this guidance and contact the HSE if they have any concerns. Our young people are alert to the danger this virus poses, but also keenly aware of the simple steps that can be taken to minimise risk and combat the virus.

Agus mo chuid ama ag teacht chun críche, ba mhaith liom buíochas agus aitheantas a ghabháil le m'oifigh féin sa Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna agus leis na hoifigh agus leis an gceannaireacht atá i gceist sa Roinn Sláinte fosta maidir lena stiúradh sa chás seo.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I call Deputies Stephen Donnelly and Paul McAuliffe, with one minute at the end for their colleague, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will start by acknowledging the hard work that is being done across the public service by our health professionals and, indeed, within the Departments of Health, Foreign Affairs and Trade and Education and Skills and many other Departments. Many people are worried right now, including in the first instance those who are particularly susceptible. The mortality rate is relatively low, compared with some other viruses that have been dealt with globally. The risks for at-risk populations, however, are very serious and those mortality rates climb to worrying levels.

Many people who interact with the public everyday are also worried. I refer to teachers, school principals, taxi and bus drivers and shop workers. Parents are also very concerned. Children are becoming increasingly concerned because of real information they are receiving from the media and, unfortunately, much false and damaging information they are getting on social media. We need to do as much as possible to protect people and to ensure everybody has the best possible information. Some aspects of this are working very well. Political communication has been good and the daily briefings by the health officials have also been very good, as is the HSE website and its Twitter output. Those things are working well. We can do much better in certain other areas, however. Other social media channels are not being used by the HSE or are being used poorly. The HSE's Facebook channel, for example, is poor. Communications to certain groups needs to be better. For example, school principals, business owners and many others have been in contact with me, as well as with other Members. They are not getting the information they need. We need to make every effort to step this up and target it to particular groups of people who are worried.

In some cases, information is being withheld intentionally and openly withheld, if that is not an oxymoron, from the public. In some cases, we are probably erring too much on the side of withholding information. One example of this concerned the first case and the decision taken

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on the information concerning the mode of transport from Dublin to Belfast. I am not criticising the Minister or the advice given by the health care officials. However, I saw no benefit in not sharing with the public the mode of transport concerned. I see a real cost in terms of spreading fear and concerns of information being withheld. Unless there are compelling public health grounds, I would ask that as much information be shared as is possible.

In terms of containing the virus, it is clear much good work has been done. I acknowledge the contact tracing work and the testing work done, as well as the securing of supply chains of masks and various other medical supplies.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is slow in some areas in upgrading its advice. Up until two days ago, Italy was still registered as green which is essentially no risk. One had to go about five layers into the Department's website to find any mention of coronavirus and then one had to read through dense text. Are we being overly cautious in categorising it as such? Three or four days ago, Italy should not have been categorised as green. Could we be a bit quicker in some of our responses and clearer in the Department's communications about the virus?

Schools have still not been directed not to travel to the hot zones, which we have called on for a while. At this point, I do not see any public health benefit of not giving the schools a clear direction. It is not just the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade stating generally people should not go to hot zones but actually telling schools they cannot travel to these areas for whatever trips. There needs to be more action in that respect.

Students coming back from hot zones are being told to go to school and if they become symptomatic to come out. Does that need to be revisited at this stage? There is a fine balance. Somebody could become symptomatic in school. As several school principals have told me, these things can spread quite easily within schools because of the environment. Is it time to be a bit more directive and err more on the sign of containment on these issues?

With regard to travel restrictions, I understand we are following EU advice and moving as one with it. However, there are many people coming from Italy, including affected parts of that country, to Dublin this weekend. Is there an argument that those specific flights from specific airports in terms of containment and public health, should be cancelled for the weekend? It is something to be considered.

Obviously, there are serious considerations required in terms of our healthcare capacity. Our health system is suffering from overcapacity in every single area. It concerns me that the Department could not answer questions today around what level of capacity we can deal with before elective surgery, for example, has to be cancelled. I am slightly concerned that we do not have answers to some of those questions.

We need to see much more communication and action from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. We have been trying to get a briefing from the Department but we cannot get one. That concerns me. Business people are getting in touch telling me they are not getting the information. I have looked at the Department's website but all there is is a checklist. Employers are concerned about their duty of care to employees, potential business shocks from this, and what supports might be available. There needs to be a much more comprehensive and open response from that Department.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** To those parents, children and teachers who are at the front line

of Covid-19, the country is behind them. They may be in individual isolation, but as far as this House is concerned, they are not isolated or forgotten.

The word “war” that I use with regard to Covid-19 is not to alarm but to demonstrate that, in this containment phase, all of the resources of the State must be used and brought to bear to prevent wider community infection. A public health crisis like this requires straight and honest communications, confidence in those at the top, and the resources to deal with it, which are resources beyond those needed in peacetime.

I will not name the school at the centre of the first case reported by the HSE at the weekend. However, many of those affected have been in contact with me and my colleagues. These people are at the front line of this war. We need to listen to them and learn from their experience, while at the same time we need to ensure we do not stigmatise them or create wider panic. I welcome the briefings from the Department which I received on Monday, the establishment of the Cabinet sub-committee, as well as the Government’s commitment to consult all parties on this matter. However, will the Minister take on board the concerns I have received? If these are not deemed appropriate by public health officials, will he explain why? In the coming weeks as more cases are heard, again and again these suggestions will be made and it is best that we deal with them now.

Many parents are concerned about the siblings of those students who been asked to limit their social interaction. We need to better communicate the definition of “close contact” and why it is so important. Will the Department of Education and Skills play a stronger role with the schools attended by those siblings affected? Families with members in isolation have told me that their other children are being stigmatised. This will only lead to further misinformation. We need to do more to protect those siblings.

Family members of those who are not displaying symptoms but who are in self-isolation are being told they should go about their daily lives. They are often, however, meeting resistance from their employers and concerned members of their own communities. We need to support them with new legislation if it is required.

Family members have also told me that information from senior clinical experts is good but the helpline is not meeting that same level. I would urge that the helpline be open longer and have that expert advice available. With regard to tests being outsourced, results should be made available more quickly to those experiencing symptoms. These people are under extreme stress. Anything we can do must be brought to bear.

Social media is a challenge in a public crisis but it is also a tool. It allows us to debunk myths and to listen to feedback. I urge the Government to use and harness social media where it can.

There is one aspect of our work which we need to do and which the HSE and no other agency can deliver on, namely, our ability to form a government. As this process evolves and we have more cases, I believe people will demand leadership from us on this issue. If we are in a war, we need a war Cabinet, leadership and to provide results.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The duty for all of us living on this island is to be sensible, thoughtful, not to panic and to do everything we can to stop the spread of coronavirus. People are naturally concerned. The WHO has said we are in “uncharted territory”. However, we are not in a war.

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On this island, we now have nine confirmed cases, eight of which are linked to travel to Italy and one a case of community transmission in the North. As developments today have shown, the challenges we face are evolving. It is clear that the fight against the coronavirus must be a unified all-island effort. The acting Government in the South and the power-sharing Executive in the North must work as one. This means having a standardised approach to protect the health of everyone on the island of Ireland. Both Administrations must be on their game in the co-ordination of health resources and in communicating the information needed to keep people safe. The coronavirus does not recognise any border and we simply cannot afford a partitioned response to this emergency. To that end, a meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council should be convened as a matter of urgency.

The responsibility of government is to do absolutely everything to protect the public and to do so in the right and timely fashion. The acting Government has a responsibility to discharge its duties with the co-operation of all parties in the Dáil. We need a more structured involvement and an all-Oireachtas approach. That is the best way to ensure the response to this emergency is seamless, coherent and smooth when there is change of Government.

This is a very real challenge for our health services and national public emergency system. Right now, we need to start strengthening our health system. We need to increase capacity rapidly. We need to start opening beds. Not only do we need to open beds, but we need to ensure that no bed is closed. The acting Minister must give a clear commitment today that the beds opened as part of the winter initiative and due to close on 31 March will definitely be kept open. He must also confirm that the 220 community nursing home beds currently reviewed for closure will not be closed.

We need to ensure that we have sufficient capacity in ICU and isolation units to deal with this public health emergency. The embargo on hiring new nurses and doctors must be lifted immediately and a plan enacted to get people off trolleys urgently. Additional resources must be available, both to our health services and to other front-line services which may be impacted.

We also need to free up beds in our hospitals by ensuring that people who have recovered and are well are discharged from hospital as soon as possible. A specific and immediate focus on ramping up the provision of home help hours will facilitate this. There is an onus on government to ensure that people can be cared for in their homes for as long as is medically possible. A comprehensive and fully resourced home help action plan will also facilitate that.

There is also a need for employers to prioritise the well-being and welfare of their staff and the health of the general public. Advice and protection for workers must be guaranteed. We need to ensure that workers are protected and have the confidence that they can take any leave that is required. Such assurances will be extremely important as the situation progresses. Where a worker is unwell or at risk from this virus, he or she must feel free to come forward with confidence to self-report, reduce risk and protect himself or herself and the public.

Particular attention must be paid to the circumstances of low-paid workers and those in precarious working arrangements. Many workers live from week to week and the impact of losing out on pay due to self-isolating could be devastating. The cost of increased household bills and additional food supplies will undoubtedly be a source of stress. Everything must be done to protect incomes. Emergency legislation may be required to strengthen sick pay entitlements and workers' rights. If that is the case, so be it; let us do that.

There is now a need for an immediate, purposeful and focused engagement between employers, the trade union movement, the community and voluntary sector and the Government to work out a genuine partnership approach to the social and economic aspects of this emergency.

Attention has now justifiably turned to what should be done about large gatherings. Every decision must be made in the interest of protecting public health and safety. In no way should the health and welfare of the community or any individual be jeopardised. We need to be guided by what the doctors, the medics and the Chief Medical Officer tell us is needed to protect public health and safety. If the emergency team makes a recommendation that a gathering or event should be cancelled, that is what must happen.

The coronavirus emergency is also a very real challenge for our communities and families. This week, my own family has been affected. My two children attend a school that has been closed down. My son and daughter are now self-isolating at home. I can assure the Dáil that their initial delight at the gift of two weeks off school has well and truly passed. They have learned the meaning of the saying, “Be careful what you wish for.” There are no visitors, no sports, no trips out with friends and no craic whatsoever. Reality has dawned on them pretty quickly. It is a trying time. Our family and school community have been thrown a bit of a curve ball, to say the least. I sincerely thank everybody who sent us good wishes over the last few days; it is deeply appreciated.

There is a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty. I know it will be the same now for the families affected by other school closures. Many parents might worry about how they might speak with their children and teenagers about the coronavirus. From my experience, such as it is, my best advice is this. Parents should not dismiss their fears or concerns. They should be honest, keep it calm and factual and, above all, make sure they know about the amount of work that is being done by so many people to fight the spread of this virus and keep them safe.

Young people often do not get the credit they deserve. We can forget how remarkably resilient, adaptable and compassionate our young people are. I have seen this in how my children and their school friends have handled this turn of events. They know that others have been affected in a far more serious way. At the heart of this situation are people who are sick. That is what is most important. Our thoughts are with those people and their families who are under enormous strain at this time. We know they are in hands of some of the very best medical staff in the world. We wish them a speedy recovery.

We face a public health emergency and a significant socio-economic challenge. It is an emergency and a challenge that we will overcome. However, we must avoid the mistakes of the past where ordinary people bore the brunt of economic downturns when Governments sought to cut their way out of a crisis, decimating public services and social protections.

The coronavirus outbreak has put up in lights why public healthcare is absolutely essential in a modern, globalised world. Public healthcare must be protected by government, not hollowed out for privatisation. Fully funded and resourced public healthcare is something to which we should all be committed. In truth, we are only as safe and healthy as the least protected in our community. Healthcare accessed on the basis of medical need not ability to pay is a sound principle. It is a fundamental of decent society and absolutely essential in preserving and advancing human health. In these times, as we come together in this crisis, I hope that lessons along with many others are learned by all of us.

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**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now come to two new Deputies making their maiden speeches, Deputy Ossian Smyth and Deputy O’Gorman.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** I thank the people of Dún Laoghaire for electing me. I am honoured to represent them in this historic Chamber and I look forward to doing everything I can to represent Dún Laoghaire. I also thank the various Deputies with whom I have spent time in recent weeks from the four parties that the Green Party has met. That has been a very useful first step. I look forward to meeting Deputies from Solidarity, if they will meet me, and Independent Deputies. We are willing to speak with everybody and look forward to that process.

So far, Ireland has nine confirmed cases of the coronavirus. The advice from the World Health Organization is that people who get these symptoms and self-diagnose in the belief that they have this illness should isolate themselves for 14 days. If a person working in a large company like Google wakes up in the morning with a bit of a dry cough, not feeling himself or herself and with a fever, that person knows that he or she can ring in and be allowed to work from home. That person knows that he or she will get full pay, that the whole building will probably be sent home also, and that there will be no negative consequences for him or her. This, however, is not the case if a person is working in a job where he or she must serve the people who work in a company like Google, and where he or she must handle food - perhaps in a sandwich bar -work behind a bar or operate a checkout. A person’s job may involve handling food, handling money and credit cards, and dealing with hundreds of people every day. It is obviously critical that such people stay at home when they are ill, but how can they? They are in a situation where if they do not earn money or do not bring home enough money, they cannot pay their rent. They cannot make the decision. There is no sick pay guaranteed for people in that situation who need it the most. There is illness benefit from the Government, which kicks in after seven days. Except, it does not kick in. After seven days one can apply for it. If one has enough PRSI stamps, one might get it. However, people do not know if they qualify. How can a person gamble on that future on the first day he or she displays symptoms? If that person it wrong and does not get the money, then he or she may not have enough money to pay the rent and may leave himself or herself and his or her family homeless. This situation is utterly unfair, and it also puts society at risk.

I ask that the Minister speak with the Taoiseach and with the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection in order to work out a way for people who find themselves in that situation, and possibly with the symptoms, so that they know they will receive their net pay until they are tested and it is found that they are well enough to go back to work. They need to be given a clear assurance, through an advertising campaign or some form of communication everybody can understand, that the right thing to do is not to go to work that day, and that it is feasible and possible to do this. This would be in the interests of the workers and in the general interest.

There are very good communications from the Chief Medical Officer and the HSE every day advising people about the status of this coronavirus. They are generalised communications and contain the same information for everybody. There are, however, some groups in our society that are looking for specific information. We are told that if a person does not have a breathing problem and is not an elderly person, then he or she may be fine if he or she gets coronavirus. This is no reassurance for people who do have those problems. People who have underlying breathing problems and illnesses such as cystic fibrosis or a rare breathing illness like bronchiectasis need specific information. They need to have a portion of the website that explains to them if there is something different they should do. Perhaps their behaviour should

be different from that of the general population. Perhaps they should avoid crowded situations. They do not know, and they are asking for that information. Will the Minister consider appointing one person as a contact for those vulnerable groups to give them their information? I thank the Ceann Comhairle and I thank the Members for listening.

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

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** As this is my first time to speak in the House, I will take the opportunity to thank the people and voters of Dublin West for giving me their support and electing me to Dáil Éireann. I am aware of the huge responsibility of this role. I hope I can repay the trust afforded to me by the voters of Dublin West by working hard for them and by taking every decision in the best interests of my constituents, our country and our planet. I also pay tribute to two former Deputies who were unsuccessful in this election, Joan Burton and Ruth Coppinger, both of whom have made major contributions, locally and nationally.

Right now, coronavirus is dominating the media cycle and the wider political discourse and this week I have hardly had a conversation in which it has not featured. There is real concern out there. I thank the Minister for the briefing he gave today and for his commitment to providing ongoing information to the House. In this climate, it is particularly important that those in authority, be it the Government, the Minister or the HSE, give clear and sanitised information to the public. We have seen how in China and Iran the initial response of the authorities was to deny and suppress information. This has contributed, at least partially, to the particularly severe nature of the outbreaks in those countries. Indeed, even today in the United States of America President Trump invented his own statistics on mortality rates and offered his own advice on self-isolation. This approach erodes public trust in authority and, as such, when public health authorities have a specific message to deliver to the public, it undermines people’s trust in that information.

We currently have six cases in the State. When one considers the trajectory of coronavirus in other countries, it is likely that the rate here will increase. There is a real possibility that the increase will be quite sudden. If we do see a sudden leap in infections and they are not put in their proper context, there is a real risk that it could create public panic. It is important to recognise the existing capacity and expertise that our national health services have in dealing with major outbreaks. Each outbreak has its own unique characteristics and our health services are already responding to the particular characteristics of Covid-19. The National Ambulance Service has introduced a home-testing scheme that will, in many circumstances, avoid the necessity for potential patients to go to hospitals in order to be tested. As ever, it is the hard work of our healthcare providers and those who work on the front line that will be the best defence against this outbreak.

Coronavirus is more dangerous to the more vulnerable members of our society. I urge the HSE to pay special attention to those who might often slip through the gaps. Ireland has a significant homeless population and many of these people are not in regular contact with our healthcare services, or they suffer chronic illnesses due to their living conditions. Other groups of people living together in close proximity are those who live in direct provision or those who are incarcerated in prisons. These people are also vulnerable. There is a significant outbreak of coronavirus in Iran’s prisons that has necessitated a large-scale temporary release of prisoners there. Due to the vulnerability of these groups and their circumstances, people who are homeless, those in direct provision and those in prison do not have the same agency as everybody else. I ask the Minister and the HSE to provide guidance to these groups.

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As we address this evolving global healthcare crisis, we in Ireland are already experiencing a crisis in our health services. We were experiencing this crisis long before the first case was diagnosed in Wuhan. We have come out of a general election where priorities were identified by the public as being our healthcare services, housing and climate change. Most people I have spoken to accept that the solutions to these problems are greater investment and a bigger role for our State. It is the Green Party's view that the scale of this investment would eliminate the capacity for many significant tax cuts in the medium term. In the context of any possible programme for Government negotiations, the Green Party has been very clear that using the available public resources to invest in the day-to-day services and in putting money into the necessary major infrastructure capital projects should take precedent over any potential tax reductions. Our experience from the recent election campaign is that this is what the public demands of us.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Congratulations Deputy.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I wish to express solidarity with Deputy McDonald and her family, and with any families throughout the State and on the island who find themselves under the strain at this time.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Collectively, we in the Dáil must up our game with regard to Covid-19. In the UK, the Prime Minister has announced that workers will be entitled to statutory sick pay if they are self-isolating in cases of coronavirus. The Conservative Government has also modified the entitlement rules such that workers will be paid from day one, not the fourth day. This is not because of their love of workers' rights, it is because these measures are necessary to help contain the spread of the virus.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has called for the same changes to be made here but the Government has, so far, failed to move on these issues. If workers cannot pay the rent or put food on the table they will go to work even if they are risk of spreading Covid-19. This is the reality of our economy. We need to change the social protection rules so that workers can afford to stay at home if they need to self-isolate.

There might be some who think that things are somehow worse in the UK than here, but please consider that with 87 cases of the virus, the UK has had one case per 764,000 people in the population. We have had six confirmed cases of Covid-19, which is one case per 805,000 people in the population. In other words, it could be argued that we have proportionately as many cases of Covid-19 in Ireland as in the UK. We should be taking the risk of the virus spreading as seriously as it is being taken by the UK and other governments in Europe. It may become necessary to move from voluntary self-isolation to requiring people to stay at home if they are contagious. It may become necessary to restrict movement to or from some parts of the country if the virus spreads in those areas. It may also be necessary to outlaw price hikes or hoarding of sanitisers or other medical goods or even of food. Existing law, which largely dates from just after the Second World War and from the 19th century, does not provide the Government with the legal power to do these things, especially in relation to potential cases rather than confirmed cases of infectious disease.

The caretaker Government that we have has no democratic mandate or legitimacy in introducing such serious measures if they become required. The Government has proposed to

provide briefings to Opposition parties or to consult them. This is not acceptable. It is not for an interim Government or interim Ministers, some of whom are no longer members of the Dáil, merely to inform Opposition Members about what they are doing. The Minister for Health is part of an interim Government, headed by a Taoiseach who failed to secure the confidence of the majority of the Dáil at its first meeting.

The Labour Party's proposal for a Dáil committee on Covid-19 has, perhaps, been misconstrued or insufficiently explained by us. Let me clarify our proposal. In the absence of a new Government that can command the confidence of a majority in the Dáil, it is the Dáil itself that should be making these decisions, not a caretaker Government. A Dáil committee on Covid-19 would not be a talking shop taking up hours of health officials' time. It should be an executive group that would work with the interim Ministers to provide democratic legitimacy for the difficult decisions that may be required. This group should literally be available at a moment's notice to agree actions that are necessary. These are not just health decisions. They are decisions about transport, retail and control of people's liberty.

Potentially, we will have to decide whether to cancel St. Patrick's Day parades before the Dáil meets again in two weeks. While others have spoken about the Dáil's willingness to meet to pass legislation, we all know that this cannot happen overnight whereas some of the vital decisions that may be required in the coming weeks may require rapid decision-making to respond to a quickly evolving emergency. This is how serious the situation is. We must not be complacent. The public needs to see the political system acting responsibly and maturely in response to Covid-19. We need to get ahead of the issue so that we can shut down misinformation and unnecessary panic.

I would make the point that the Dáil sat overnight when it came to the financial crisis. The Dáil also took immediate and strong action when farming was threatened by foot-and-mouth disease. People's lives and their peace of mind are being threatened by Covid-19. It is unthinkable that we would be any less diligent and responsive to Covid-19 when there is clear evidence that this is a very serious emergency.

I spoke to the mother of a child with a compromised immune system. She cannot understand why the Government has not required businesses to provide hand sanitisers, as we did for foot-and-mouth. The people want clear instructions and guidance, including on travel and ordinary business, to come from those with democratic legitimacy. This is not a sensationalist position. On 30 January, the World Health Organization called Covid-19 a public health emergency of international concern. The state of California has declared a state of emergency to activate the necessary powers to deal with this issue. All around Europe, governments are taking the necessary action.

We in this House are in a special position. I do not doubt that our officials and public servants are doing everything they can to address the situation but we do not have a proper Government in power. It is incumbent on all of us in the Dáil to fill the democratic deficit until a new Government is formed. There are a great many workers who will find it very difficult to survive on statutory illness benefit of €203 per week. Many workers will have no contractual entitlement to anything beyond this, but they will have the same requirements to pay rent, pay bills and heat their homes. They may have additional costs associated with GP fees or the cost of medicines. This is the reality for low-paid workers, and one in four workers in this country is classified in this category, as the OECD has confirmed. We have to take action to help these workers take the right actions to stop the spread of the virus, and to the extent that it is possible

to do so, we have to avoid low-paid workers being made materially worse off for doing the right thing.

Doctors, nurses and other hospital staff are also likely to be affected by the need for self-isolation as a result of Covid-19. We could very quickly find ourselves in a situation where we do not have enough medical staff to operate our hospitals or primary care centres. This is on top of the problems in our health service where the Government relies far too heavily on temporary agency staff and has an effective staffing embargo that has stopped people gaining permanent roles. This is why we need a committee of the Dáil put in place to make executive decisions collectively. This is what the emergency requires.

It is frankly disappointing, to say the least, that some Members are proposing briefings along the lines of the Brexit briefings, as if we had a normal Government with democratic legitimacy. It is also disappointing that some Members are proposing dedicating time at the Dáil's next sitting to making statements on various issues rather than demanding that we deal with the emergencies facing our society where we, as the people's representatives, are the democratically elected decision-makers. We cannot afford this kind of complacency and I hope that all of us as Members will reflect as the Covid-19 situation evolves and become more prepared to insist on the Dáil's prerogative to be central to democratic decision-making about how we respond to this emergency.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Sherlock has made a very valuable contribution but I should point out that we are not in a constitutional lacuna. The Constitution is quite clear in respect of the responsibilities that exist for the Government, albeit a caretaker Government, and any Government that existed before it or any Government that may come into existence after it.

I now call Deputy Jennifer Whitmore, who will share time with Deputy Cian O'Callaghan. Is this Deputy Whitmore's maiden contribution?

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** It is. I thank the Ceann Comhairle and all of the Oireachtas staff for welcoming us and facilitating the new Members of the House as we transition into our new roles. This is my first speech as a newly elected Deputy and I am delighted have the opportunity to stand here today as a representative for County Wicklow. I thank all of those from County Wicklow who have entrusted me with their vote.

I wish it were under different circumstances that we are here today but it is imperative that we discuss the developments of Covid-19. What developed as a localised disease in one country has now spread throughout the world, with several cases now confirmed in Ireland. I acknowledge the difficulties being faced by those coping directly with Covid-19, particularly those who have tested positive, and I wish them a quick return to full health.

As have most Deputies in the Chamber, I have spoken to many concerned members of my constituency and community over the past week. While their primary concerns are health focused, they also raise many issues relating to other aspects of their lives. I have met many parents in Wicklow who are concerned about further school closures. They worry about the impact this will have on their children's education. They also worry about what will happen to their income if they have to take time off work to care for their children. Local shop owners are worried about their business. They are afraid their transactions will decline if public gatherings are curtailed or tourism numbers drop. If that were to happen, they worry about the impact it will have on their businesses. Culturally, there are fears that major events such as St. Patrick's

Day or some Galway 2020 events could be cancelled.

These are valid concerns felt by many people throughout the country who are trying to do their best by their families in circumstances where there are many unknowns and much uncertainty. One matter of which I am certain is that Ireland will do its best throughout the crisis if we can respond together as a community and if we recognise that through our collective efforts we will restrict the potential of the virus to spread. Our care for the vulnerable in our families and communities is a priority now, and those affected by the virus will need the support of everyone around them to get through this difficult time. We all rely on one another and our communities in this crisis, as we always do.

This, in effect, is what we call social democracy, where we recognise our interdependence, our reliance on our community and how vital it is to nurture and support that community. We also rely on our Government and our public services to respond correctly in a rapidly-changing environment, following hard-won lessons in other countries. Accessible, reliable and timely information will be crucial over the coming weeks, as will the assurances that the Government has robust plans in place to deal with any necessary escalation phases. I thank the Minister and the Department for the updates we received earlier. A great deal of work is going on in the background. As public representatives, we have a responsibility to provide leadership in our constituencies and not to add to any panic that could be within our communities.

On a broader note, the rapid spread of the virus and the daily news of its progression are a sign of the interconnectedness of an increasingly global world. Not many opportunities arise that allow us to reflect on how connected we all are. It takes a global crisis such as climate change, a global recession or, as is now the case, a virus spreading quickly for us to gain a perspective on the challenges of this increasingly interconnected world. We have an opportunity to acknowledge there are vulnerabilities within our modern societies and we need to respond by examining how we can be more sustainable on multiple fronts. The challenges of globalisation tell us we need to redesign our interconnected world in a manner that benefits not only our health but also the future of our environment, of biodiversity and of an economy that serves our society by creating sustainable, robust communities across the board.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** Ós rud é gurb í seo mo chéad uair ag caint sa Dáil, ba mhaith liom i dtús báire an deis a thapú mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le pobal Chuan Bhaile Átha Cliath Thuaidh a chur anseo mé. Oibreoidh mé go crua mar ghlór ar son na firinne agus ar son cearta sóisialta. Ba mhaith liom freisin thar ceann an phobail buíochas ó chroí a ghabháil leis an iar-Theachta, Tommy Broughan, a chaith na blianta fada ag troid ar son leas an phobail.

I commend all the healthcare staff, everyone in the HSE, all the public health officials and our front-line staff on the work they are doing. In times of crisis, it is often those who are marginalised or vulnerable who bear the brunt of the impact. Without swift action in this instance, that is what will happen. We need action to protect people who are homeless or living in overcrowded housing, those who are in precarious work and individuals with underlying health conditions in order that they will not be hit hardest. Workers with temporary contracts or near-zero hour contracts and those in the service industry are particularly at risk. Due to changes in demand in the services industry, many already face reduced hours and income before any additional threat might arise for them.

I attended the launch of a report by the Think-tank for Action on Social Change, TASC, on household debt yesterday. One of the findings of the research is that those who rent privately

are four times more likely than homeowners to face not being able to afford to heat their home. Many low-paid workers already struggle to make ends meet and, therefore, any reduction in income will put them in an impossible position. They cannot be left in a situation where they will potentially be out of work, have their hours reduced or have to self-isolate, without their income being protected. It is very important that we move as quickly as possible to guarantee income protection, especially for low-paid workers, given that people are in different circumstances in more permanent working arrangements. That is not just important for people on low pay but also for wider society, for which there may be a health consequence. Research in the US has found that in those states that have introduced mandatory sick pay conditions, flu risk decreased by 11% in the first year. If the conditions are not created whereby people on low pay can take the responsible action they want to take, namely, to protect their health and that of their families, it will have a wider health and societal impact. This vital move needs to happen fast.

Our healthcare system has half the capacity of intensive care beds compared with the European average, although it is welcome that steps are being taken to try to increase it. We must do everything we can to increase capacity in private healthcare to supplement the capacity available in the public healthcare system.

I turn to the issue of people living in overcrowded accommodation. We all know from our constituencies that it can be common for three generations to live in one house or for an entire family to share one bedroom. Such people will also be in a more vulnerable position and we need to examine what additional measures can be put in place to support those living in emergency accommodation or direct provision and homeless people.

We need to act now to protect workers on low pay or zero-hour or temporary contracts and those working in the so-called gig economy. We need to act now to co-opt what increased capacity we can in the private healthcare system, which will need to be drawn on.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I agree with all Deputies that the response to this issue includes all of us as individuals and our personal hygiene, and that how we conduct ourselves is crucial. If I start coughing, please do not panic. I do not want a national panic on television because a Deputy is coughing. I have a cold. We should be discussing the overall response of the State to this serious crisis. In the public eye, and at the briefing earlier, the HSE has been downplaying the seriousness of the lack of capacity to deal with a significant rise in the spread of the virus. Anybody who has had reason to visit an accident and emergency department in the past six months has had the experienced being in a war zone. Trotting out advice to self-isolate and stay at home will not convince the public otherwise. Giving minor statistics, such as the number of beds increasing from 12 here to 22 there, will not help to deal with the capacity problem. The public needs a much more thorough explanation.

One measure taken in Britain would be useful, namely, the testing of existing patients in hospitals who have chronic lung problems in order to ensure that they do not carry the virus. At the briefing earlier, I raised the issue of the inadequate supply of hand sanitiser in schools but I did not get a satisfactory answer. There was no acknowledgement of the matter except to say that children are better off washing their hands than using hand sanitiser. As we know, however, in many schools there is not an adequate supply of hot water or paper towels for children to dry their hands with. Drying them with hand towels is a no-no.

I agree with Deputy McDonald about cross-Border co-operation.

*7 o'clock*

It is in a national situation such as this that one realises how farcical and unworkable partition is and that we need an all-Ireland health service with an all-Ireland response.

I want to raise the question of intellectual property rights. We were told this morning about a company called Gilead Sciences, that has a base in Cork. Ironically, Gilead is also the name of the spooky medieval country in *The Handmaid's Tale* but apparently Gilead Sciences is developing an anti-viral drug. Intellectual property rights are important because in the privatisation of medicine and cures, intellectual property rights can be held onto by a company without being shared with the public services and the people who work therein who have the knowledge and experience of dealing with anti-viral medication. We need to move away from that. There should be a global discussion to say no company should have the intellectual property rights to an anti-viral drug that may find a cure for Covid-19. I wrote to the caretaker Minister, Deputy Harris, about the pharmaceutical industry. LloydsPharmacy, which is notoriously anti-trade union but which has many branches across Dublin city, particularly in working-class areas, has almost doubled the price of hand sanitation lotion. Many people have phoned or emailed me to complain about this. I have asked the Minister about this and I asked again this morning what the Government intends to do about this. Can the Government intervene to stop that exploitation that seeks to never waste a good crisis by profiteering? If not, will the Government at least issue a public condemnation of profiteering from this crisis? I agree with the ending of access to two-tier medicine.

On the issue of workers' rights, we are exposed in this country as being weak and as often providing non-existent protection for workers. We already know how poor workers' rights are in Ireland in comparison with the rest of the European Union but it is a decrepit system and the statutory rights of workers were changed in 2013 by a Labour-Fine Gael Government when the three-day period without sick pay was effectively extended to one week. If one looks at what Boris Johnson is doing, he has already acknowledged that in the first week, everybody will be paid from day one if they have to self-isolate. It is a bit of a stretch but it makes him look a bit like James Connolly compared with what the Government is doing for workers' rights. We have heard nothing about it. We have seen correspondence from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, to IBEC. We have seen pronouncements from the WRC which state there is no obligation to provide sick pay and where companies do not have a sick pay scheme, there is no obligation for them to provide it. It beggars belief that we are not recognising the needs of workers, particularly low-paid workers and workers in the gig economy, to have a basic living income if they have to self-isolate. There will be a reluctance on behalf of these workers to acknowledge they have symptoms and that they need to stay at home because poorer workers and workers on low pay not only depend week by week on the money they earn but often day by day. We do not depend on our wages in this way and neither do many other people but we need to recognise that hundreds of thousands of workers do. This State needs to intervene and pass emergency legislation that allows sick pay from day one, which increases that sick pay to a living wage and provides that, if necessary, employers will be faced with an extra levy or extra taxation to pay it. We cannot allow workers to not be able to self-isolate where necessary. This is not just a workers' issue; it is a public health issue. I hope we can move immediately to introduce legislation on that basis.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** On the issue of intensive care unit beds, will the Minister bring the number of intensive care unit beds in this State up to at least the EU average within a short time? There were 5.2 intensive care unit beds per 100,000 of the population in this State at the end of

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last year. The European Union average is 11.5 per 100,000 people. That is less than half. The recommended level of occupancy is 75% but in reality, the level of occupancy is 88% and in some units, it is 96%. Dr. Rory Dwyer, clinical lead of the Irish National Intensive Care Unit Audit said last year, “You can cope with sporadic cases but if there is a large number we will struggle to cope and probably won’t.” Dr. Michael O’Dwyer of St. Vincent’s University Hospital stated that repeated calls he had made for increases in ICU beds had been ignored, that the HSE had its “head in the sand” and that the system here lacks surge capacity. There were 255 ICU beds in the system in 2019. The Minister gave information on an increase and any increase is welcome. The figure he mentioned was 20 but 20 is not adequate. I put it to the Minister for comment and reply that the number of ICU beds within the system here should be brought up to the EU average - in other words it should be more than doubled - within the space of one week. That would be an emergency response and I ask the Minister to respond to that. Beds and staff are needed in preparation for a potential emergency.

On sick pay and illness benefit, we have an absence of a comprehensive occupational sick pay system in this State. A previous Government increased the number of days which a worker must be absent from work before being eligible to apply for illness benefit from three days to six days. That was implemented by a Labour Party Minister in a Labour- Fine Gael Government. We have the phenomenon of presenteeism. There has been talk about absenteeism but there is also presenteeism where workers who are sick feel they have no choice in seeking to defend their precarious situations and their families but to go to work when sick or possibly sick, compromising their health, the health of their work colleagues, the health of the public and so on. We need to have a comprehensive occupational sick pay system that can immediately be accessed by workers, funded by a proper regime of employers’ social insurance contributions and heavily weighted on the most profitable companies, that will cover a worker who is ill, who needs to self-isolate or who needs to care for his or her children or family members.

The example of the nurses is the best practice. Their unions have negotiated an arrangement with the HSE whereby there is already an existing sick pay scheme but they would have sick leave on full pay if they self-isolate. The National Bus and Rail Union has correctly said that should apply for public transport workers and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has rightly said it should apply for all workers. I add my voice to the calls from those unions.

The cuts in the illness benefit arrangement that were made in 2012 by the then Minister, Joan Burton, must be immediately reversed.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I would like to start my maiden speech by thanking most sincerely the people of Wexford, 11,849 of whom voted for me, first preference or otherwise. I thank my campaign team and express the admiration I have for each and every one of them. They came out to canvass in their hundreds, in most cases after a long day’s work, which was a big honour for me. I hope the attainment of a seat in the Thirty-third Dáil is in turn testament to their hard work and belief in me.

Being elected by the people of Wexford as the first Independent female candidate to take a seat, and only the second woman after Avril Doyle to hold a seat in the constituency, represents change in itself. I intend to execute that mandate for change in full. The quest for change saw Sinn Féin and Independents garner 40% of the first preference vote in Wexford. This was reflected across Ireland. The national media and the Government were shocked. Why did people vote for change? Since 2007, many people’s lives have changed immeasurably and though they have been continually lectured by the Government on the huge strides that have

been made in mending the public finances and saving them from oblivion, to many, their lifestyles remain where they were in 2011. I refer to rents spiralling, negative equity, high taxes, unaffordable childcare, free GP care with no GPs, no mental health services, no mortgages and no homes. They had expectations that the recession would not last forever, that the wage cuts were necessary, that the increased taxes were temporary and that the bank rescue and the troika were the only show in town. There was no way out. NAMA was to save the day. Socialism for banks and vulture and cuckoo funds but capitalism for everybody else has been the reality. These entities prosper in an environment of low or, in many cases, no taxes, while all the time middle income Ireland is screwed. The reason people voted for change is because they now realise that corporate Ireland prospered on the backs of Joe and Mary. An expectation to own their own home was shattered by the reality that the home offering will be an apartment or a duplex-style unit in a high-density development in a rural constituency like Wexford that they neither want nor can afford. That is why people voted for change.

If the economy is stronger and employment levels so high, how could things be so bad? Why are there no houses? Why are rents at an all-time high? Why are there long hospital waiting lists? Why are farmers on the breadline? Why are fishermen destitute? Why can parents not afford to send their children to college? Why are children in their 30s living with their parents? The answer lies in the fact that the politicians have failed to deal with solutions that do not accommodate their notion of the optics. For example, NAMA was initially sold to the public as a system that would warehouse loans and ease the impact of the crash. Instead, the position changed midstream and the loans were sold to vulture funds. This resulted in the utter collapse and devastation of the housing market in Ireland. The main adviser to the Government on these loan sales ended up being the main purchaser of the loans. The decision to sell Irish loans to international funds had the following effects: it collapsed the Irish home-building industry; it created a home rental crisis; it created negative equity for the majority of homeowners in Ireland; and it created the greatest homeless crisis in the history of the State. Somebody had to be blamed for the bust and builders were an easy target. NAMA pursued them with vigour. Meanwhile, the banks and corporate Ireland got a bailout.

When the Government realised that there was nobody left to build houses and that the skilled workforce had left for greener pastures never to return, it had to employ new policies to cover its mistakes. What did it do? It introduced tax breaks for cuckoo funds to purchase properties. It introduced ministerial guidelines to increase densities in order to bring volumes to the market faster, albeit it was advised that this was not viable outside the M50. It never meaningfully consulted the building industry. Whatever the spin doctors say about builders, and they may have been part of the collapse, as were the Government and its agencies, the main cause of the collapse was the oversupply of credit presided over by a regulator who could only be described as being asleep at the wheel. Builders are part of the solution. They are the ones who will build houses. They need to be brought inside the circle. Politicians and civil servants alike need to listen to them.

The main people now facilitating the building of properties are the cuckoo funds which, as we know, pay no taxes but the optics are that we are building. We will never be able to break free of the rental limbo this Government has put us in nor will the affordability crisis ever be over unless we change how we do things. That means taking decisive action that works. It is not about the optics. I hope the lesson has been learned. Change means policies that work. It means strong leadership, standing up and being counted when faced with officials that will not listen.

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In Wexford, people earning the average industrial wage cannot purchase the average three-bedroom property being sold on the market, without the site costs included, for €230,000 because they only qualify for a mortgage of €170,000. Change means looking at and introducing current macro-prudential rules, not applying rules of another era. Can we consider a mortgage interest rate cap? As we hear every day, banks are making excessive profits. Can we simply legislate to equate multiples of borrowing to the current interest rates, not ten year old interest rates?

We must not forget that for every new build the Government takes in 33% in taxes yet Irish Water does not have a guaranteed funding structure. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, is refusing to change the ministerial guidelines to accommodate the housing requirements of rural areas, which is endorsed by the Planning Regulator, Niall Cussen, or *vice versa*, all of which requires change if we are ever to truly solve the housing crisis. Change most definitely meant that the people did not want the pension age to rise to 67. It should remain at 65.

Most of all, we need to recognise that Ireland is not Dublin and that life exists beyond the M50. While the voters recognised this, it appears the Government did not, introducing Dublin-centric policies that devastated the very essence of rural towns and villages. If one were to examine the IDA Ireland policy, one would think that, particularly in the context of my constituency of Wexford, motorways were being provided to go only one way. There were only three visits to Wexford in 2019 but there were 269 visits to Dublin. Legislation introduced such as zero-tolerance drink-driving laws that were overbearing and ill-thought-out when implemented in rural Ireland served only to devastate rural areas and businesses and create social isolation when all that was required was a rural transport infrastructure because in urban areas there are buses and taxis on every street.

Rural Ireland depends on rural industries - farming, fishing, haulage and tourism. With too many businesses such as tourism operating on a seasonal basis, they do not have the footfall of urban businesses. That is why the VAT increase should never have been applied across the board in the hospitality sector. It should have been a city tax. That is a prime example of the urban-rural disconnect. In farming and haulage, the lack of labour, the green agenda and over-regulation are all serving to erode the bottom line and are making many smallholdings and businesses that raised families in the past unviable. The EU budget is currently under discussion. Due to Brexit, the budget is reduced, which means that, in turn, the CAP budget is being revised and reduced. It is time we stated our case for farmers and hauliers. As a country, Ireland is not just geographically disadvantaged, it is also competitively disadvantaged as a result of Brexit. We should call on the EU to institute the support it promised so vocally in the hope that it might overturn Brexit, or was that more optics?

Rosslare Europort must be upgraded to its operational potential. We have to start to walk the walk if we are ever to alleviate the congestion in Dublin Port that causes the increase in carbon emissions, which is the very thing we are being penalised for through carbon taxes. When hauliers' productivity is halved due to congestion and lack of space, they are being asked to pay more. Why is it impossible to join the dots and see the benefits of change?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is out of time.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I have one final paragraph. All of this was happening without resolve and then the coronavirus hit. What can we do? What can the Government do? It can

take the lead. We must display truth and transparency in how this process will work. Are we prepared - yes or no?

As leaders, the burden is on those in government to make clear decisions to close schools and cancel mass gatherings. It should not assume that its message is being heard. I have one question for the Minister.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is out of time now.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** In the event that any of the main parties, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, the Green Party or Sinn Féin, can agree a formation of Government, would all have to convene a special delegate conference to allow members approve a programme for Government?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We do not have this time problem with people from Cork and not normally with people from Wexford.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Has due consideration been given to a contingency plan-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is contagious.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** -----so as not to give the country the excuse of the coronavirus as an excuse for forming the Government?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thanks be to God for mentioning the coronavirus at the end.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am glad to see the Ceann Comhairle is in great form this evening. He is very lenient.

I will begin by complimenting our medical staff and all those research specialists who are working tirelessly to meet the challenges that are being presented by the coronavirus, Covid-19. Containment remains the top priority for all countries. The situation is serious and very worrying. According to the World Health Organization, management of Covid-19 globally is not a one-size-fits-all approach and must be tailored to the transmission scenario faced in each country.

Early robust measures, which are key to saving lives and halting transmission, need to be implemented here in Ireland. It will only be possible to measure their effectiveness in time. It is absolutely vital that we do all we can to interrupt human-to-human transmission including reducing secondary infections among close contacts and health care workers, preventing transmission events, and preventing further international spread.

Many of the concerns that have been raised with me, and no doubt with most other Members of this House, other politicians and with health care professionals, centre on the capacity of the HSE and our wider health systems to cope with this virus should it become more widespread among the public. There is general concern and a feeling of hopelessness on this. The sub-committee and the agencies are doing their best but people are worried. They do not have great faith in the HSE on many things. We wish the HSE well in its endeavours but people are concerned and rightly so. As Deputy Verona Murphy noted some moments ago, the Government was not listening to the people and has a habit of not doing so. It needs to bí ag éisteacht le cluas oscailte i gcónaí.

We already know that before this outbreak, the state of our preparedness was not exactly

world class. That is acknowledged by all. We have heard more concerns about the mid-west by Deputy Connolly. If anything, Covid-19 has exposed the extent to which the chronic capacity issues within our hospitals can lead them to become easily overwhelmed. We see that on a daily basis with the trolley crisis. People are not even on trolleys any more but are on chairs, stools and anything they can sit on. South Tipperary General Hospital and Limerick University Hospital are the worst affected in the country with regard to trolleys. Parts of Limerick University Hospital are fairly modern but Clonmel is an older hospital and does not have space. There is a league comparing the worst hospitals for trolleys and there is a trolley watch. The situation is much worse in Clonmel, which is an old building with narrow corridors and the Minister himself has accepted that.

The Minister visited the hospital in Cashel and admitted he was quite taken aback by the extensive range of facilities which are unused there. I have suggested locally that in light of the ongoing capacity issues facing South Tipperary General Hospital, it might be more prudent for the HSE to consider locating its coronavirus isolation units at Our Lady's Hospital, Cashel. The Minister has visited it with colleagues and myself when he saw that its top floors were empty. There is activity on the ground, which we appreciate and which cannot be interrupted, but it would be ideally located for the purpose of isolation. It is a relatively modern building. The HSE has confirmed that it has identified isolation units in all acute hospitals, including South Tipperary General Hospital, where specific multidisciplinary virus preparedness committees also will be created, which we welcome.

The priority here has to be about maintaining patient safety and minimising the risk to the general population should a case of coronavirus be identified in Tipperary, while ensuring the safety and protection of all the healthcare workers, including nurses and doctors and the general team from the porters to the consultants. It must also be about maximising the best use of existing resources in such a way that will not cause greater levels of disruption than are warranted in an already overstretched health system. That cannot be said strongly enough. We are overstretched and we do not want to make the existing trauma and stress worse. This is why the HSE should at least explore the possibility of locating the isolation units in a hospital facility such as Our Lady's Hospital, where there are no inpatients and where the impact on patient care can be minimised. I acknowledge that there are day cases and child and special needs facilities there but they can be relocated if necessary.

South Tipperary General Hospital is already at absolute capacity and under enormous pressures to maintain normal services, as is University Hospital Limerick. It makes sense therefore to see if we can make positive use of Cashel hospital, especially as most people would accept that it has the potential to offer a wider range of services. If it turns out on foot of expert advice that locating the isolation units in Our Lady's Hospital, Cashel are not appropriate, then that advice must of course be deferred to in the interests of patient safety. I do not want the usual excuse rolled out that there is no lift and it is not accessible. There is something wrong there. Some €22.5 million was spent on that complex and it is outrageous that it is left empty.

Much more needs to be done on advice to workers and employers. The OECD has already warned that the virus presents the global economy with its greatest danger since the last financial crash. That is a stark warning. Meanwhile the Minister for Finance has said that he will review the economic effect and see if a policy action by the Government is necessary. This seems totally absurd; surely this must be examined now, rather than waiting for what will happen and trying to deal with it afterwards. Why are we still having this wait-and-see approach from the Minister and the Government when as we speak businesses, schools and tourism is

being negatively affected?

While I accept we need a proportionate response, that kind of measured response will only come if the public and the business community are convinced that the appropriate protective measures are in place. During the severe acute respiratory syndrome, SARS, epidemic in 2003, the House debated a motion aimed at assessing the adequacy of the State's response. It centred on the actions of the then Minister for Health, Deputy Micheál Martin. It was felt that there had been a serious erosion of confidence in the public health service arising from the mishandling of the SARS threat by the Minister and the issuing of inadequate, confusing and contradictory communications. The motion also noted that these failures were symptomatic of a more general failure by Government to effectively and efficiently manage the health service at a time of unprecedented spending. The HSE was set up under the Minister's watch. Bedlam, confusion and distress ensued among the public, which we are supposed to serve as Teachtaí Dála sa Teach seo. We are meant to serve the public which we have not been doing. There are parts of that motion which could have been written yesterday because in many ways, we do not seem to have learned many lessons 17 years on. That is very sad. We experienced the SARS outbreak and should have learned from the mistakes in order that we can be ready.

There is still a need to deliver a more comprehensive public information campaign. The public feel they are in the dark. When that happens, rumour and panic can spread, as we all know. We must do all we can to prevent that, while ensuring we hold those responsible for effective public health and safety to account. I am very concerned, as many people are. I am aware of the efforts of the churches, schools and people in other areas of public life to minimise any risk. However, the Minister saw the hospital in Cashel. It is a shame and scandal in 2020 to have that lying empty after €12.5 million has been spent on the building, with the rest spent on the complex, some of which does very valuable work in regard to services for the elderly and so on. It is a shame to see it empty. It could be fortuitous if this unfortunate epidemic forced it to be opened, given there has been resistance in the HSE to opening it. People are on chairs and on trolleys in Limerick, Waterford and elsewhere. The Minister and his officials have seen it and I ask him to examine the issue.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Connolly, who is sharing time with Deputies Joan Collins and McNamara.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** As I have only four minutes to speak, the Minister will forgive me if I do not dwell on the niceties. However, I thank the staff who are at the coalface. It is important to keep a balance during this crisis. At the end of the day, we are talking about a virus where over 80% of people who are infected will only suffer mild to moderate effects. While this is not to lessen it in any way, we need to keep it in perspective.

The crisis has focused our attention on a number of issues. One is the issue of workers being advised to self-isolate without any clarity whatsoever in regard to their pay. The second is the issue of the washing of hands and the fact that, in this country, we have got to the stage where we need to be directed as to how to wash our hands with soap, which is worthy of consideration. I heard the term "respiratory etiquette" being used. We need to update our respiratory etiquette, which, in itself, is a message.

We then look at the Minister's message, which comes from the establishment, as it were. The Minister has to learn the lesson from the cervical smear scandal that we need to give out as much information as possible, stop being patriarchal and realise that information is power.

Information empowers people, so we must give out the maximum amount of it.

The state of the health service has been brought into acute focus. Earlier today, I read some of a letter from Fórsa. I want to put this in perspective in regard to Galway, where I understand there are four cases in the regional hospital. I see no difficulty in naming that hospital. In fact, I think it helps to empower people to know that the hospital is able to cope, and the effort should be in regard to telling us that the hospital is able to cope. As I understand it, four cases have been brought to the attention of the hospital. Whether they are in the hospital or not, I do not know, but it should be clarified whether they are and, if so, whether they are in isolation. I understand they are not from Galway but from outside the county. Maximum information is very important, particularly in regard to Galway city. As the Minister knows, Galway is in serious crisis and the hospital has a serious shortage of beds and staff on every level, including ICU beds.

We then come to the Fórsa letter. The Minister advises people not to go to the hospital and to stay at home, and to go to their GP or to get the GP to come to them. We see that that system is crumbling. Fórsa uses the most forceful language I have ever seen in my life. I am going to give the Minister a copy of the letter, which is three pages long and dated 4 March. It states that more patients will end up in hospital for longer because they cannot be discharged, and that the scale of closure orders in regard to primary care centres is a significant shock to the overall system in the west and also unprecedented. I am reading this letter again, as I did this morning. It states: "I have not witnessed that scale of service closure in my two decades as a trade union official". That is a letter worth looking at.

When the Minister talks about building confidence and encouraging us, the best way to do that is to acknowledge the crisis that exists in our health service and in primary care. Let us have a clear, honest information package in regard to what is going on, such as the embargo that is not an embargo and all of the posts that are not filled. Let us acknowledge that first and then, when we are trying to build confidence among people, give them maximum information on how a hospital will cope. Today, there are 36 people on trolleys in Galway and the figure was 26 yesterday and 32 the day before. Mr. Reid, who is in charge of the HSE, tells us we are facing a potentially unprecedented health situation arising from the virus. I say we were facing that prior to the virus.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** As I only have four minutes, I will also avoid the niceties. I know that front-line workers and public officials have done a lot of work. I wish them well in their work in the next period because they are possibly going to face a difficult situation in hospitals and elsewhere.

I refer to the letter from Patricia King, the president of ICTU, to the Taoiseach yesterday. The letter refers to the problems that could be faced by hundreds of thousands of low-paid, non-unionised workers who do not have a contract for sick pay with their employers. In a severe crisis of Covid-19, these workers may be asked to self-isolate or even face temporary lay-offs without pay. Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, employers have a duty to protect staff and, under the same Act, employees have a duty of care to fellow workers. Workers in this situation will have to rely on sick pay or unemployment benefit if laid off. These benefits are very low in Ireland. While we have pay-related social insurance, we do not have pay-related benefits, as is the norm in most EU states. The flat rate of sick pay is €203 per week. However, it does not cover the first six days because, as has been said, it was extended from three to six days in 2012. I note the Tory Government has moved to reduce the waiting time

from four days to none. Workers classified as self-employed, often in bogus self-employment, may not even be entitled to State benefits.

What is the Government going to do about this? I heard the Taoiseach say today that the Government will make an announcement next Monday. When is the Government going to meet ICTU? Is it going to bring in legislation, if necessary, to change these mechanisms?

With regard to high-risk groups, I was with Cystic Fibrosis Ireland this morning as I have a family member with cystic fibrosis. There is huge concern among people with cystic fibrosis, COPD, cancer and diabetes. I was talking to a woman who said that in the first 71,000 cases in China, the death rate among people with diabetes was 8.4%. We have to plan to put in place a liaison officer along the lines of the officer in place during the swine flu epidemic in 2002, when the first patient who died was a cystic fibrosis sufferer. That has to be done.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I thank Deputies Collins and Connolly for sharing time. An outbreak of Covid-19 or coronavirus in County Clare became public knowledge across the county today. Obviously, people are very concerned and afraid.

I want to pay tribute to one group of people in particular, those who work in the ambulance service. As we speak, people are being contacted and the ambulance service is travelling out and swabbing and testing people for Covid-19. In a way, I am very humbled by that, when we compare how seriously they take their duties and responsibilities with, perhaps, how seriously this Dáil has taken its duties and responsibilities since we were all elected. It should be of reassurance to the people of Clare that the ambulance personnel are doing what they are doing. Obviously, there is an inherent risk to all medical personnel from this outbreak. It is a huge tribute to them that they are doing what they are doing.

If anybody in Clare is listening to the Dáil at this hour, I urge them not to present to their GP surgeries or accident and emergency units if they fear they may have contracted the virus but instead to telephone ahead. I am happy that people are being contacted. I am not happy because the Minister has told me but because I have heard from health professionals across the county that people who have been in contact with the virus are being contacted and ambulance personnel are making their way to them to test them. I pay tribute to them for that.

**Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** I wish merely to take the opportunity to update the House and set out to procedures in place across a number of key agencies and services under the remit of my Department, namely, the immigration services, An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service, and the Irish Prison Service, IPS, some of which were referred to earlier. One essential characteristic that all the services have in common is the high degree of interaction between the personnel and members of the public. It is probably unnecessary for me to say that a level of particular care is needed in this. In this regard, my Department has established a cross-functional Covid-19 response team comprising senior officials from within the Department and from the agencies to which I referred.

With reference to immigration services, the current EU advice is for borders to remain open and for persons to follow the travel advice issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. A number of aspects of the immigration system involve engagement with persons moving into the State or non-EEA nationals. The most visible of these is at airports, in particular Dublin Airport, where border management immigration officers of my Department immigrate approximately 16 million persons per year. There is a close working relationship between staff

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at the Airport, the DAA and the HSE. Immigration personnel closely follow all advice from the HSE and, in the event that a suspected case arises, the clear protocols laid down are carefully followed. The immigration services of my Department are also working closely with the HSE on a daily basis across a number of areas, including accommodation centres for international protection applicants, public offices used for registration of immigration permissions, and international protection offices. Along with guidelines on good respiratory and hand-hygiene practices, hand sanitisers have been provided, Covid-19 risk assessments have been issued to each of these service areas, and together with the HSE, my officials are ensuring information is kept updated on a daily basis and that any changing circumstances are responded to in an effective manner.

With regards to the visa regime, in line with other EU member states and overall Chinese Government policy, the public offices to accept visa applications in China remain closed until 16 March and the matter will be reviewed in advance of that date. In accordance with best practice, contingency planning is also in hand to ensure priority immigration services can continue to be provided, should circumstances warrant.

An Garda Síochána has been closely following HSE and the Department of Health guidelines and has been issuing advice to staff via An Garda Síochána's chief medical officer, CMO, on the matter and will continue to do so. Garda management have plans in place to manage on a case-by case basis any issues that arise in their workforce, which totals more than 17,500 people. An Garda Síochána continues to operate as normal and will keep their procedures when dealing with members of the public under continuous review. Regarding the Courts Service, a contingency planning group to review its plans to meet the challenges caused by the arrival of Covid-19 in Ireland is in place. Business continuity plans for courthouses and business are being updated and reviewed and official HSE guidance is now issued to staff and a communications plan is in the course of being developed for staff and court users.

The IPS continues to work closely with the HSE in developing contingency planning specifically for the management of Covid-19 should it present in prisons, in line with best international practice, to reduce the risk of exposure to staff, prisoners, visitors and the wider community. This includes maintaining safe prisons with all essential services including, *inter alia*, staffing, healthcare, catering provision and the maintenance of plant and equipment. The IPS has dedicated its executive clinical lead infection control manager to preparedness in this regard. A comprehensive information pack has been made available to all staff and an educational module has been completed.

In conclusion, I acknowledge the leadership, commitment and dedication of the Minister, Deputy Harris, his team in the Department of Health, and right across the HSE. Regarding my Department, I commend all our officials and staff who are working on the front line to deliver public services at such a time of challenge.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I am sharing time with Deputy Cathal Crowe.

The coronavirus is a serious challenge globally and nationally. It is crucial that we all follow the advice of public health experts as they are in constant contact with the WHO. The coronavirus affects older people and those with certain health conditions to a greater extent. Older people who may contact this virus will need additional wrap-around supports to deal with it. This morning I met with the CEO of ALONE, Mr. Seán Moynihan. ALONE is an organisation that supports older people and it is urging older people to take extra care but to remain calm.

Its advice is similar to the HSE guidelines - to wash their hands regularly, especially after direct contact with ill people or their environment, and to avoid close contact with people suffering from acute respiratory infections or other illnesses.

The HSE website has the most up-to-date information. Not all people, however, especially the elderly, are in a position to source this information. This can create a vacuum and can cause anxiety and upset. It is imperative through community care, public health nurses and GPs, that the correct information can be circulated to elderly people who are not online, to avoid any unnecessary panic and misinformation. As we are currently in the containment phase of this virus, clear, clinically-based information is essential. I welcome the fact that the Minister will meet patient advocacy groups tomorrow. I have spoken to him and he has informed me that he will raise the issue of those who are not online to enable them to access the relevant information.

There is an onus on other Departments to be actively involved at this worrying time and I welcome the fact that the various Ministers have been present for the debate. I specifically refer to the Department of Education and Skills, which has a role to play in supporting school principals, boards of management and school pupils, given there is a critical mass of people in schools on a daily basis. Several schools, especially secondary schools, had pupils on school tours in Italy during the mid-term break. The information on the 14-day quarantine has led to much confusion for some parents. More clarity is required on self-isolation and on whether the school has the authority to request self-isolation. If a student has been on holidays in one of the affected areas, clear guidelines are required to prevent panic or confusion. I witnessed this recently in a school in the south east where a pupil returned who was not infected, but it caused panic and confusion among parents wondering whether that particular pupil should have been quarantined. We need more definitive guidelines on the 14-day quarantine, especially for pupils in schools.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Gabhaim buíochas as an deis labhairt ar an ábhar fíor-thábhachtach seo.

It is right that this House should be sitting tonight to discuss the coronavirus. It is a pity that we did not sit in the past number of days as many communities in our country lay beneath flood waters. As is well documented, there are four confirmed cases of the coronavirus in north County Clare. The health and welfare of the affected family is topmost of my concerns.

The HSE has chosen, quite similar to last week's confirmed case in Dublin, to anonymise the names of the affected family and the part of Clare from which they hail, but with most people now on various social media platforms, there is no effective anonymity. Overnight three separate schools in Clare texted parents to announce that, on precautionary grounds, they would not open today. I know of a number of businesses in Ennis and beyond who have instructed workers to stay at home until more is known. These closures are fine in the short term but not sustainable on a long-term basis. The people need confidence and supply at the moment of a very different type. They need to have confidence that the Minister for Health and the HSE will lead from the front in the containment of the coronavirus and they need a supply of accurate information. In the absence of accurate information, people have turned to social media news feeds that are riddled with mistruths and misinformation, all of which gives rise to levels of hysteria that will do the country no good. The public advice needs to be a bit better than to talk to one's GP, to the HSE and to wash one's hands well. We need to have far more capacity to contact trace those who have been infected with the coronavirus. Perhaps the Minister could consider assigning a team of workers in each local authority area to help the HSE in this regard.

Business owners and schools also need assurances that suspected cases of coronavirus can be ruled in or out as the case may be. All of this can only happen through scientific testing. I implore the Minister and all the staff in his Department and that of the Minister, Deputy Harris, to better resource the screening and contact tracing systems that have been put in place.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I thank the officials in the Department of Health and those working in the HSE on the front line of this healthcare challenge. I express my very sincere best wishes to those who have contracted the virus. I hope they have a very speedy recovery. I sincerely hope that those who are worried about contagion can get the comfort and the information they need. Many of us here this evening have been privy to briefings. The fact that we still have questions, and questions are being asked here this evening, should serve as a signal to the Minister that more information is needed. If we still have questions after the briefings we have had, we can only imagine the questions people outside this Chamber must have.

The Minister knows well that we have a serious and ongoing issue with capacity in our health service. We know the causes. We have discussed the failings of Government policy on many occasions at committee, in this Chamber and elsewhere. I do not want to dwell on the policy decisions that have brought us here, but I note that the capacity of our health service to respond to the challenge of Covid-19 is dependent on the availability of staff. We have heard from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, that staff are queuing up to be hired - those are the INMO's words, not mine. Staff members are available but they are not getting contracts. They need to get them as a matter of priority. Regardless of whether the Minister chooses to acknowledge it, the recruitment embargo has to be lifted without any delay. The emergency needs to be dealt with in a practical way. The only way to deal with it is to recruit and hire more staff.

We need to be cognisant that a whole-of-Ireland approach is needed if we are to address this challenge meaningfully. That means we need to have an all-Ireland public health approach that maximises the benefits of being a small island while ensuring we meet the challenges we face as an island. Practically speaking, this means harmonising the advice given between North and South; ensuring the provision and sharing of capacity between North and South; if necessary, a ring-fenced and dedicated all-island budget; a joined-up approach to the purchasing of essential equipment and devices; the unlimited sharing of medical information between North and South; and the development of an all-island model of contagion. These are practical steps that will serve to protect our island. We managed the outbreak of foot and mouth disease as an island and this outbreak should be no different.

The Minister and I both know that the single biggest determinant of ill health is poverty. The poorest and those in the lowest-paid and most precarious work are likely to be impacted very heavily by this emergency. We are asking the Minister to waive any waiting period for sick leave to ensure workers who get up early in the morning but cannot afford to lose a day's pay are compensated. We are also asking the Government to be very clear with employers that they have to play their part.

I wish to take this opportunity to request that a plurality of voices is brought into the decision-making process from this Oireachtas. I do not want to upset the work of the national public health emergency team and the HSE national crisis management team in any way, but rather to work to help with this serious public health emergency. With the greatest respect to the caretaker Minister, in a few weeks he may not be the person in charge of the Department of Health. For that reason it is imperative that there is high-level involvement from the main

parties in this House, so that if the caretaker moves out and the new Minister moves in there is continuity, no time is lost and the new Minister can hit the ground running. I hope this request is taken by the Minister in the spirit in which it is intended; that is, as a constructive suggestion.

I ask the Minister to focus at least some of his advice on those who are living with the consequences of the housing emergency. How can someone self-isolate if he or she is living in a family hub? How can a person in a homeless hostel self-isolate? Will additional respite beds be provided? Let us think about this practically. If a person is caring for someone in his or her home, he or she cannot self-isolate unless that person can be cared for.

I pay tribute again to the front-line healthcare workers who are at the coalface of this challenge. I pay tribute to the families that are now dealing with this and trying to ensure good sense prevails. They may need to access respite services. They need to know that such beds are there, not that they are coming, and that they can self-isolate quickly. People want to act in the interests of public health but they need to know that the Government, in whatever capacity, will be on their side, will provide the facilities they need and will respond to the needs of carers, who have a very particular concern at this time of public health emergency.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** We face a very serious and potentially very dangerous situation. As this debate has been going on, the tenth case in Ireland has been publicised. It is being reported that this is the first case with no known link to northern Italy. The person who has unfortunately contracted Covid-19 was not in northern Italy and potentially got it from someone in this country. The worrying trends in other countries show the potential for exponential growth in the infection rates and the impact the virus will have on our society. It is clear that any weaknesses in the health service will be ruthlessly exposed.

It is worth looking at the situation in South Korea, where there has been an explosive growth of the virus. More than 500 new cases have been discovered in a day. The South Korean health system is now on the verge of running out of hospital beds for those who need them. South Korea is a country with 12 beds per 1,000 people; Ireland has three beds per 1,000 people. If we get into that kind of situation, the weaknesses of our health service, which are the product of decades of underinvestment by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, mean we will have a very big problem indeed. This underlines the need to invest in building a properly resourced and adequately funded national health service, with a massive expansion in staff and resources. In the immediate term, it underlines the need to avoid this level of exponential growth.

I have no doubt that the workers on the front lines in our health service and other parts of the public service will work as hard as they can to cope with and prevent the further spread of Covid-19, but a key element of successful containment is public co-operation. The HSE correctly instructs those who have symptoms of the virus to self-isolate for 14 days. That is a big responsibility and a big ask of ordinary people suffering from a cough, shortness of breath or fever. The State needs to step up to assist those people in doing this. That will be of benefit to those individuals, but it will be of particular benefit to society as a whole. This means being serious about providing people with assistance in dealing with the impact on their lives. Those who are self-isolating will not be able to go to work or look after their children. What provisions is the State putting in place now to assist those people and ensure they are not afraid to not go to work because they will not be paid or will lose their jobs? Such people might go to work even though they feel a bit sick and think they might have the coronavirus. We need emergency measures to introduce mandatory sick pay. Businesses must be forced to continue to pay their workers if they stay at home, either because a workplace shuts down and instructs people to stay

at home or because workers themselves contract the virus.

*8 o'clock*

If the business cannot pay, it must open its books, prove it cannot pay and the State should step in to cover the costs. In the case of school closures, which may have to become widespread, all of a sudden, parents are in a crisis and they should also be allowed to stay home from work and continue to be paid. Similarly, those who rely on welfare should no longer be required to go into dole offices and interact with others, and so on. If we do not take such measures, it will be disastrous because people simply cannot afford to forgo their pay cheque or to leave their children home alone.

My final point relates to one which has already been mentioned and concerns those who are living in overcrowded conditions. We are facing a housing crisis. Generations of families are living in single housing units and overcrowded emergency accommodation and hubs. I was contacted by someone whose family suffers from Bart syndrome, a disorder where those affected have a very weak immune system because of their white blood cell count. The family is living in emergency accommodation with around 40 other families, including more than 100 children. There are communal play areas for children and kitchen areas for families to cook their own food. Visitors are only allowed in the reception area. This family has to avoid all of those amenities because of the danger of contracting an infection. If they or someone in the homeless hub were to contract coronavirus, one can imagine how rapidly it could spread. Again, action is required. Could vacant buildings be taken and used immediately to provide necessary housing for people?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin):** I welcome the fact that we are having these statements tonight. I express solidarity with the people who have been directly affected by the coronavirus so far, and their families. I also commend the many people in communities who are working at the front line to try to contain the situation. I thank them on behalf of everybody in this House for the work they do.

The virus has already brought considerable human suffering and major economic disruption across the globe. According to the latest OECD interim economic assessment, the coronavirus presents the global economy with its greatest threat since the financial crisis. At this point, it is too early to be able to assess what will be the overall impact on the economy, but the potential impact is huge.

Not much has been said tonight specifically about the tourism industry, but it is an area that is hugely exposed. I assure everybody in the sector that we are very much on top of this and monitoring the situation. If necessary, we are ready to intervene if the situation becomes worse. The importance of tourism in Ireland cannot be overstated. More than 260,000 are employed in tourism in the Republic of Ireland alone and those jobs are in every community. It is a critically important part of our economy. We have seen the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak in Italy. Flights have been suspended. In addition, the airline, Flybe, collapsed last night. The spin-off effect of the coronavirus outbreak is immense. We are keenly watching this space as I am very concerned about potential job losses, especially in the tourism sector. We know the bite has started to take effect. There have been numerous cancellations of events, in particular of corporate events but also across the board. Speaking to people in my constituency and throughout the industry, I have heard of many cancellations, in particular over the past ten or 11 days. That is very worrying for the season ahead.

The Minister, Shane Ross, and I have established and participate in a Covid-19 tourism monitoring group made up industry stakeholders, the tourism agencies and Department officials. We met yesterday and the previous Wednesday and we will meet again next week. The group is monitoring the disruption to the sector and is assisting in formulating our response to what is still an evolving situation. Fáilte Ireland has set up a Covid-19 industry advisory group, which met on Tuesday. The purpose of the group is to provide support to the tourism industry and facilitate the rapid sharing of information and insight to help improve the sector's understanding and response to the outbreak. Tourism Ireland expects a decline in holiday bookings from overseas over the next four to six weeks, especially from the USA, which is very worrying. Tourism Ireland's marketing activity in markets is being kept under close review. That will continue as necessary, with marketing campaigns being monitored on a case-by-case basis. Despite the nervousness and uncertainty we now face in the sector, in addition to the couple of years of uncertainty due to Brexit, which had a particular impact on the UK market, it is important that we remain calm, react proportionately and proceed with business as normal, while at the same time adhering to public health guidelines. As of now, the St. Patrick's Day festival is going ahead as planned. This could change if the situation escalates and pending the guidance on mass gatherings to be published by the national public health emergency team. The significance of the St. Patrick's Day festival is that it effectively kick-starts the tourism season in this country. The message that would go out if the festival were to be cancelled would be very worrying and detrimental to the entire industry.

In the area of sport, like everyone else, I am very disappointed about the postponement of the Six Nations rugby match but, again, we must look at the bigger picture and public health measures. I hope that people recognise the postponement was deemed a necessary precaution in the interest of public health. It remains our intention that the game would be rescheduled later in the year, as happened in 2001 when we had the foot and mouth outbreak. I express my appreciation to the IRFU for its timely response to the advice of the Minister and the Chief Medical Officer. Other upcoming rugby games and soccer matches may now be in jeopardy. In particular, I am mindful that we are due to host four Euro 2020 games in June. We are monitoring that issue closely and will react as appropriate as time progresses. Similarly, regional sporting events, be they national league or even local games, will be monitored as the situation evolves. We will keep a very close eye on it. I assure everybody of our absolute vigilance in relation to all matters pertaining to tourism and sport. We will continue to work with all of the people concerned, including those in agencies and Departments, to ensure the best possible outcome.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I wish to share time with Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** Like everyone present, I have deep concerns and many questions regarding our preparedness for an escalation in cases of coronavirus in this State. Many previous speakers raised issues and concerns that I share but one area of concern is not being addressed in the way I would like. There seems to be a concerted effort to get good, clear information out on mainstream media and I am thankful that Twitter and Facebook have joined the fight against misinformation. However, I am concerned about how we are getting information and how prepared we are to protect vulnerable adults. It disappoints me to see updates without Irish Sign Language interpreters. I struggle to understand how small typefaces can be used in infographics, marginalising those with impaired vision or who have difficulty

reading. It is important that in our quest to inform, we include everyone. This is especially important in workplaces where the onus should be on the employer to inform all employees of plans and policies in relation to this global outbreak.

In disability services across the country there are vulnerable adults who can only be dealt with by a trusted carer. Are those carers and service staff being trained to check for the presence of the virus? If we enter a stage of community contamination, what are the contingencies for such service facilities if an outbreak occurs? They find it difficult enough already to access funding to which they are entitled. Is there a fast-track application process for those units to apply for increased resources if they were to be placed on lockdown? Likewise, what will we do in homes when unpaid carers of the elderly and vulnerable get sick? Who will we send in to take over their full-time caring jobs? Those are issues that need to be addressed when we are informing the public about what is being done to combat and prepare against the virus.

The Taoiseach told the nation this week that there would not be a problem with the Minister for Health increasing health funding where necessary because a massive amount would not be needed. In a televised address following the caretaker Cabinet meeting, the Taoiseach said the Ministers for Public Expenditure and Reform and Health would meet to identify additional requirements. He said they did not expect a large amount of money would be needed. He said they were not talking about a huge amount of money, but they were talking about additional money. There is never enough money available in health so it is important to clarify how this issue will not impact on funding. I have serious concerns about this. Funding will be a key issue. It is important to acknowledge the hard-working care professionals who are doing their best to try to resolve this. The Minister needs to clarify tonight the exact position on funding. He is saying that he does not believe we need much funding, but that funding is available. He also needs to clarify that no other services will be affected by this because there are those who need services on which they are still waiting.

**Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan:** This is my maiden address to the Dáil so I will take the opportunity to thank the people of Cork South-West who have put their faith in me. I assure them that I will repay them for it.

It goes without saying that I share the concerns expressed by other Deputies regarding public health. Public health is paramount. The safety of our communities is also paramount. All necessary precautions must be taken. That goes without saying.

I want to touch on the potential impact on the tourism industry. I am delighted the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, is in the Chamber while I am making this point. I am delighted he has assured the tourism industry that some steps will be taken. I come from Cork South-West. Many Deputies will be familiar with the area and may have been there. It is a place of immense beauty, from the Old Head of Kinsale in the east all the way down to Dursey Island in the west. There are beautiful tourism towns, such as Kinsale, Clonakilty, Skibbereen and Bantry, and they depend on tourism for employment. We have to put safeguards in place to ensure that there is as little an impact as possible on such towns. The café owners, restaurateurs, hoteliers and publicans are worried and concerned about the potential impact. Obviously, there will be an impact because containment will mean a restriction on the movement of people. Potentially, there will be a restriction on flights. It is already happening. I guess the impact is evident already. We have seen the situation with Flybe. The Cork-Cardiff flight will be affected. I have already heard of hotels in the Cork area whose books have been cleared because of cancellations, including cancellations of business trips. Therefore, we need to put plans in place. The tourism

bodies - Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland - need to take steps and may need to rethink strategies, including marketing strategies. If there is a marketing strategy for northern Italy, maybe we need to rethink it and focus on the domestic market in order to keep it robust. Perhaps we need to think the same way about the United Kingdom, obviously depending on the escalation of the spread of the virus there.

It is really important that we do not turn our backs on the tourism industry. It was said when the VAT increase was made that we would revisit the measure in the case of crisis. This is a crisis and it is worth revisiting.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** As the Minister for Health is more than aware, it was confirmed within the past hour and a half that there is a patient in the intensive care unit in Cork University Hospital who has tested positive for the coronavirus. The patient is receiving intensive care in an isolation unit. As with many other Deputies from affected areas, my phone has been hopping since the case arose. There is obviously great concern in the community, as there will be in every community across the island. No community is likely to be untouched by this. It will have a great impact on life in Ireland and on health. We need to do everything we can. I appreciate everything that previous speakers have said about the impact on industry but I appeal to people and say that if our primary consideration in dealing with this illness is the economy, there will not be much of an economy left if the issue is not dealt with. The overriding consideration must be public health. It must outrank all other considerations.

I am sure the people of Cork are very concerned, as am I and every other Deputy. I emphasise to the people of Cork that they may have heard advice on washing, coughing and sneezing, and they may have paid some attention to it. Now is the time to enforce the advice absolutely, every day, every minute every hour. People have a role to play. The impact of such advice, when it is effective, is unbelievable. I appeal to the people of Cork to do their part and try to minimise the transmission of the infection. That is what people can do.

Much of what can be done rests in the hands of the public service, particularly the health service. There are people who are working very hard. I understand and appreciate that individuals such as Dr. Tony Holohan, Dr. Ronan Glynn and the Minister for Health and his staff are working extremely hard. We need a number of things. For many years, we have had a health system under pressure. Our bed occupancy rate is about 92%. We need to free up beds. Some 20% of people who contract the coronavirus will have to be treated in hospital. The other 80% can be treated in the community. Our priority, which I am sure is being explored, is to take people out of hospitals in so far as we can. If they can be moved to nursing homes or step-down facilities, that needs to happen. If they can be moved home, with the assistance of home help, that needs to happen. If we can find alternative care settings that are not being used for medical purposes but which are suitable, they need to be identified and used as soon as possible. I urge the authorities in Cork, but also those across the rest of the State and the Minister, to try to achieve what I am outlining. Staffing is central in this regard. Staffing is central to being able to bring people home and deliver the extra beds. In this regard, I appeal to the Minister to lift the cap on home help as soon as possible in order to allow as many home helps as possible to get into the system and help people to come home as soon as they can in order to free up the beds that are so badly needed. I urge the Minister to lift the employment embargo in order to ensure as many nurses as possible can be employed. The INMO is always saying there are nurses who are dying to work. They should be given the opportunity.

The Department of Education and Skills needs to step up its communication with schools -

not only with those that are affected but also others in the affected communities because there will be a crossover between primary and secondary levels. Schools in the communities in question need to be communicated with and given guidance on what they should be doing. They can be in a difficult situation. I will be conveying this directly to the Minister. Schools are not just places of education; they are also pastoral settings. Children are scared. A principal told me that contact had been made with the Department of Education and Skills to inquire about the resources that may be available for teachers or students in regard to empathy and teaching people how to cope, but there is nothing in that regard. This matter needs to be addressed. We need to offer some peace of mind and security to children. We need to give teachers the support they need to deliver in this regard. That is important. In addition, there must be clear guidance. Schools are in a difficult position in terms of deciding whether to close. I urge them to err on the side of caution but I realise that they are in a difficult position.

My final point relates to social welfare. As soon as possible, we need to deal with the position of people who are forced to self-isolate such that they will not be wrecked owing to a lack of income. The changes in recent years, pertaining to the six-day rule on sick pay, were regressive. They make this even harder. If legislation is needed to address this matter, we should produce it. People should not be left out of pocket.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** Ós rud é gurb í seo mo chéad óráid sa Dáil nua, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an bpobal i gCuan Bhaile Átha Cliath Theas. Is mór an onóir agus an phribhléid í bheith tofa mar Theachta Dála sa Teach seo arís. Tá súil agam go mbeidh mé ag obair go héifeachtach ar son na ndaoine sna blianta amach romhainn. I thank the people of Dublin Bay South who re-elected me as a Deputy.

I am disappointed that I am speaking for the first time in this, the Thirty-third Dáil, on such a depressing and dangerous issue as the coronavirus. It is important to note that unfortunately every generation produces its own diseases. This fact has dominated human history for centuries, but it places a huge challenge upon us. Particularly at times like this, policymakers have important decisions to make.

I welcome what the Minister had to say. It is important that all the decisions made in respect of this issue be guided by experts and people who have the requisite medical expertise. It is a very serious issue. It is affecting people’s health and also their way of life. I am aware that the Minister is consulting experts. I also ask the Minister to look beyond the people advising him at present to other experts who have knowledge in the area, who are concerned about the issue and have something important to contribute to the debate. I have been fortunate in recent days to have been contacted by Dr. Carmen Regan, who is a consultant specialist in maternal medicine with approximately 30 years’ experience. I ask the Minister to read the article and letter Dr. Regan has written, which is published in today’s edition of the *Irish Independent*. It would be worthwhile for the Minister to give that consideration. Dr. Regan makes a number of significant points in the article and letter. Specifically, the issue she raises, which I acknowledge the Minister and others will consider, concerns what we do about the significant threat posed to Ireland and other parts of Europe, by the significant outbreak of the disease in northern Italy.

In many respects, northern Italy, unfortunately, is the place where Covid-19 is at its most prevalent in Europe and we need to consider what steps need to be taken in that regard and whether we need to restrict transport from that area. Self-isolation is an integral part of responding to this but it will be difficult for those who are self-employed if they are told to self-isolate. We need to do something for them if we place an obligation on them to self-isolate.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** De ghnáth, deirimid go bhfuil áthas orainn labhairt ar aon ábhar atá faoi chaibidil sa Dáil ach níl áthas ar aon Teachta a bheith anseo ag caint ar an ábhar seo. Tá buairt ar gach duine. Tá an baol ann go mbeidh daoine sa tír seo trína chéile le buairt ach mar a dúirt an Teachta Ó Laoghaire, tá comhairle tugtha ag an HSE do dhaoine, go háirithe chun a bheith ag ní na lámha. Sin an rud is tábhachtaí agus caithfidh muidne anseo agus muintir na tíre an eiseamláir sin a thaispeáint do gach duine ionas go mbeidh gach duine ansin ag glacadh an comhairle sin agus tá mise ag cur mo mhéar i mo aghaidh, rud nár cheart dom a dhéanamh ach an oiread. Caithfidh a bheith an-chúramach. Tá a lán rudaí ar siúl agus tá buairt ann ach tá sé tábhachtach go n-éistíonn gach duine leis na saineolaithe. Aontaím le mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta O’Callaghan, go bhfuil saineolaithe eile ann agus tá an-mheas agam ar Dr. Tony Holohan agus an fhoireann sin. Tá an-taithí acu. Bhí seisean ag obair i rith géarchéim an SARS i 2003 agus tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil an taithí sin aige. Tá taithí ann ar fud an domhain freisin. Tá mise ag impí ar an Aire, gan aon eagla nó buairt a bheith air nó ar an Rialtas, aon chinneadh a thógáil, is cuma cé chomh dian, ait nó nua agus atá sé. Má tá gá ann scoileanna a dhúnadh nó aon rud eile a dhúnadh agus a stopadh sa tír seo ionas go mbeimid in ann smacht a chur ar an ngalar seo, caithfidh é sin a dhéanamh. Tá sin déanta i dtíortha eile ar nós na Síne, Singeapór agus tíortha difriúla ach níl aon dabht ann ach go bhfuil dul chun cinn déanta acu maidir leis seo le rialacha an-daingean agus an-ghéar a chur ar fáil ar son leas an phobail. Aontaím le gach Teachta gur an rud is tábhachtaí ná leas an phobail agus sláinte an phobail. Beidh damáiste eacnamúla déanta ach tá sé sin chun tarlú. Caithfidh pobal na hÉireann a chaomhnú agus a choimeád sábháilte.

**Deputy John Brady:** Up until this evening, there were nine confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Ireland. That may be changing as we speak. The head of the HSE, Mr. Paul Reid, said that Ireland remains in a containment phase regarding the coronavirus but he said it would be a challenge to maintain this and the health service was preparing for further phases. Mr. Reid also said many people had been asked to self-isolate for the protection of the public. The British Government stated yesterday that up to 20% of the workforce may be off sick during the peak of a coronavirus epidemic in Britain. Unfortunately, that figure could be realised in Ireland, unless everything that can be done is done during the containment phase.

I have serious concerns that thousands of low-paid workers may be unable to afford to self-isolate. The Government must ensure that nobody is forced to work due to financial pressures, despite medical advice to self-isolate. We have had welcome statements from different Ministers regarding their portfolios. Several Departments were also referred to in the Minister for Health’s speech. The one glaring omission is a statement from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Such a statement is badly needed because under health and safety legislation workers are obliged to ensure they do not pose a threat in their workplace. The right thing to do is for all employers to continue to pay workers who fall ill or have to self-isolate due to the coronavirus.

Unfortunately, some employers will not pay their workers. Yesterday, IBEC refused to give assurances that employers would provide sick pay to workers affected by Covid-19 on an across-the-board basis. The only option for many workers is illness benefit. Due to the qualifying criteria, however, many might not have sufficient PRSI contributions to qualify for illness benefit. Even if a worker qualifies for the full illness benefit, there is no entitlement for the first six days of absence from work. That period was increased from three days under this Government. The Government must make immediate changes to ensure illness benefit is paid from day one. Where there is a financial need, there must also be an emergency payment for

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anybody who does not meet the qualifying requirements for illness benefit. A simplified application process must also be rolled out to ensure people do not have to attend their Intreo office or a GP to get a medical certificate.

We will continue to work with the caretaker Government to ensure that virus containment efforts succeed. Central to that effort, however, are the thousands of workers who may be fearful that they cannot afford to self-isolate. We must ensure they can do so without the fear of being financially impacted. It would be helpful to get a statement from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection on that issue. It would also be helpful if the Department would clarify if legislation is needed to ensure people are not going to be financially impacted because they do the right and responsible thing by self-isolating. That aspect also needs to be looked at.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank the Minister for taking these statements and listening to the concerns of Members. I acknowledge the efforts of our public servants, particularly the medical staff encountering the spread of Covid-19 throughout the country. It has not, thankfully, yet been widespread but in monitoring what has happened in other jurisdictions, we may be at the beginning of something in this country. I hope I am wrong on that. I also acknowledge the efforts of others across the country, in particular the Garda, teachers, transport workers, front-line service workers and workers in shops, hotels and other service industries for their co-operation and assistance during this period.

As mentioned earlier by our spokesperson on health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, general communication has been good. I call, however, for more of an open approach, particularly regarding the identification of certain areas. I do not refer to individuals because we need to protect individual identities. We need people to self-identify and we do not want to put that in jeopardy but we need to trust the public. Public health must be our main concern in all of this, and it should be our top priority at all costs.

The HPSC had identified nine cases so far but that could be ten from what we are hearing this evening. I express my solidarity to those families and individuals concerned because it is worrying for them and their communities. The public expects a plan to deal with community transmission when that happens. That needs to be forthcoming. Unfortunately, I found the Minister's statement earlier a little light on detail. I know this is an unfolding issue for him and his officials, but we need to reassure the public with more detail of the Government's future plans regarding the coronavirus. In China, 80% of the cases were mild, 15% needed treatment in hospital while 5% required intensive care treatment. On that basis, the Minister's earlier announcement of just 20 intensive care beds is entirely insufficient, and I fear it may feed public concern.

I also welcome the establishment of the Cabinet sub-committee to co-ordinate our national response. The Government must show leadership on this issue. Constitutionally, the appropriate body to exercise such power is the Government, not an *ad hoc* committee of the House.

I welcome the guidelines put before the House earlier. The regulations to prevent the stockpiling of sanitised or medical products should be put in place. Vulnerable individuals must be guaranteed access to such products.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.30 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Thursday, 19 March 2020.