



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL  
(OFFICIAL REPORT)

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoín, 8 Deireadh Fómhair 2020*

*Thursday, 8 October 2020*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Lahart) i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna - Questions

*Note: Ministerial and Departmental titles have been updated in the Question text in anticipation of the relevant Government orders to give legal effect to the Taoiseach's announcement in Dáil Éireann on 27 June 2020.*

## Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

### Air Corps

1. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence his views on plans for the provision of primary radar. [28523/20]

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** To the shock and horror of most of the country it was again reported last week that Ireland is the only EU country that does not have primary radar to monitor its airspace. More than 70% of EU traffic literally travels over our heads but we can only see those aircraft if they choose to allow us to do so by turning on their transponders. Why is this, and what is the Minister's view on the provision of primary radar?

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I thank the Deputy. As this is the first time she and I have had formal questions, I congratulate her on her appointment. I look forward to working with her.

My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained to the greatest extent possible so as to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government, both at home and overseas.

The acquisition of new equipment for the Defence Forces remains a clear focus for me. Future equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are considered in the

context of the White Paper on Defence and as part of the capability development and equipment priorities planning process. The principal aim over the period covered by the White Paper will be to replace and upgrade, as required, existing capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements, including response to security risks and other emergencies, both at home and overseas.

Regarding primary radar, the 2015 White Paper on Defence states that should funding beyond that required to maintain existing Air Corps capabilities become available, the development of a radar surveillance capability for the Air Corps is a priority. The 2019 White Paper update pointed out that the National Development Plan 2018-2027, which provides €541 million in capital funding for defence for the period up to 2022, does not make provision for a radar surveillance capability for the Air Corps.

The Equipment Development Plan 2020-2024, which was published in June 2020, sets out the key priorities for equipment investment in the Defence Forces. The provision of a primary radar capability is included in the equipment development plan's pre-planning category. Funding for the provision of radar surveillance capability for the Air Corps has not been provided in the current resource envelope under the equipment development plan. Any future decisions in this regard will be in the context of Defence Forces priorities, having regard to the ongoing security environment and any associated developments. However, the inclusion of a primary radar project on the equipment development plan will ensure that should funding become available, Department officials and Defence Forces colleagues will be in position to progress the matter through the equipment development plan's prioritisation and decision-making process.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** Some years ago, an agreement was negotiated whereby the Royal Air Force, RAF, would patrol our airspace. I understand that agreement was signed by the Department of Defence, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Irish Aviation Authority, a commercial State body not directly answerable to the Oireachtas. Is it true that the input of the General Officer Commanding of the Air Corps, who has statutory responsibility for military aviation, was not included in these negotiations? When was that agreement reached? What are its details? What impact will Brexit have on that agreement?

The lack of primary radar is the reason other state entities have been probing our airspace for years with high-altitude bombers and escorts. These foreign aircraft can see us but we cannot see them. They are not testing their capabilities, but those of the RAF.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** It is important to be honest with people. The Air Corps is not equipped to monitor aircraft flying over the entirety of Irish airspace, nor is it tasked with that role. We have a relatively small Air Corps which does a really good job at what it is asked to do. We are not like many other countries that spend hundreds of millions or billions of euro on fighter aircraft that can monitor and defend airspace. For many years, we have chosen not to prioritise that equipment and funding. As Minister of Defence, a brief which I have held previously, I think it is important to be upfront about our capability and the role we ask the Air Corps to perform. We have just purchased three new Pilatus PC-12 aircraft which are very well equipped for surveillance. The Air Corps has a limited defence capacity, but it is important not to pretend to have a capacity we do not have.

Regarding relationships with our closest neighbour on defence issues, we have a memorandum of understanding with the UK on training and several other issues. Some arrangements for sharing capacity, which might be expected of two countries next door to each other, are in place.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I note the Minister did not actually answer the questions on when the agreement was reached or the impact Brexit will have on it. At the moment, our skies are patrolled by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, NATO, an organisation we consistently refuse to align with, citing our neutrality. Our pilots are trained in America and Australia, one of NATO's largest troop contributors. These facts can be viewed as eroding our expressed neutrality, the cornerstone of our foreign policy. The international standing of Ireland can now be legitimately questioned in this regard. In my opinion, this is a serious loss of sovereignty. I will ask the Minister again. What are the details of the agreement with the RAF and what impact will Brexit have?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Along with many others, I am working very hard to minimise the impact of Brexit across all areas and ensure that Ireland and the UK continue to co-operate in partnership on a range of issues, as would be expected of two neighbouring countries. The idea that the Deputy has a problem with military personnel training abroad to ensure we have the most advanced training capabilities available to us when we are training soldiers, Air Corps personnel and naval officers is bizarre, frankly. Ireland is not a member of NATO and is not going to join it. We are not compromised by our relationship with NATO. We are a neutral State that is militarily non-aligned and we behave as such. That does not mean that we do not speak to NATO or engage in overseas peacekeeping operations in a way that is linked to NATO, as we have done in the past. We currently work with NATO on operations in Kosovo, for example, and we previously worked with it on de-mining in Afghanistan. There is nothing wrong with that. It does not mean that we are compromised in any way. Rather, it means we focus on interoperability to ensure that when we have peacekeeping missions abroad, we can work with others to make sure we protect our troops and do a good job.

### **Defence Forces Representative Organisations**

2. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Defence when he will meet representative organisations of the Defence Forces and discuss the high-level implementation plan for strengthening the Defence Forces. [29116/20]

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The members of the Defence Forces are heroes and patriots. They have been the last form of defence for the country on many occasions. They travel the world to defend peace in difficult and dangerous places. They work in shockingly difficult conditions with very low pay. That has been very damaging to morale within the Defence Forces and has also dealt a blow in terms of their numbers to the extent that it is increasingly difficult for the Defence Forces to function in the manner they wish. When will the Minister meet representatives of the Defence Forces?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** On assuming my role as Minister for Defence, one of my first actions was to meet the Permanent Defence Force representative associations, namely, PDFOR-RA, and the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO. At the meeting in a barracks in Cork, we agreed that we should commit to meeting on a more regular basis and I am happy to follow through on that. I hope we can meet quarterly or at least three times per year or as needed. As the Deputy will be aware, the report of the Public Service Pay Commission on recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces was published on 4 July 2019. The report was accepted in full by the then Government and, in order to facilitate implementation, an extensive high-level plan entitled Strengthening our Defence Forces – Phase One, was agreed and

published on the same date.

I am aware that the representative associations have been briefed on a regular basis by the officials of my Department charged with co-ordinating all the projects in the high-level plan as to progress in each of the project areas. I understand that some ten briefings, oral and written, have been provided to date, with the latest taking place on 1 October. In addition to the briefings, there is a standing invitation to the representative associations to submit any material they wish to be considered relating to any of the projects. In this context, several submissions with extensive observations have been made and I appreciate this engagement.

The immediate pay recommendations in the high-level implementation plan have all been delivered on foot of their acceptance by the representative associations. The timelines for the other projects which are set out in the plan were reviewed as the projects progressed and as work requirements become more evident. I am satisfied that the projects outlined in the plan are being prioritised and delivered as quickly as possible. However, it must be acknowledged that the anticipated timeframes for certain projects were overly ambitious. In addition, the Covid-19 emergency has impacted on some of the project timeframes. In some cases, personnel resources were necessarily reassigned to matters relating to the Covid-19 response and where other essential work was necessary, that took priority. However, work is ongoing on all projects and they are being progressed as quickly as possible.

I intend to develop a very good relationship with the representative bodies. I hope we can meet regularly. I expect that we will meet next week to go through the terms of reference for the upcoming commission for the review of the Defence Forces. I also wish to speak to them about a series of other issues. My style and approach as a Minister will be one of engagement. If necessary, that will be robust engagement, but I certainly wish to hear what the representative bodies have to say. We will respond as best we can.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I welcome the Minister's statement because I have spoken to representatives of the Defence Forces and they have asked when the implementation plan for the strengthening of the Defence Forces will be discussed. A representative of RACO recently stated that there are 300 fewer personnel in the Defence Forces than there were when the plan was put in place last year. Although there is a plan, we are still going in the wrong direction. Military officers have been quoted in newspapers as stating that, so far, it has been allowed to fail. It was obvious that the plan was failing well before Covid hit, so it is not necessarily the case that the pandemic has affected its implementation. A retired general told me that the low numbers are affecting operational capability on land and sea. I understand the Minister may have a different perspective and approach and I welcome that, but it is really important that he discuss with representatives of the Defence Forces how each level of the strengthening of the Defence Forces plan is implemented.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** To be blunt, that is happening. It is true the benefit of the plan has not yet been seen in terms of increasing numbers in the Defence Forces. We had and continue to have a recruitment and retention challenge in the Defence Forces. That challenge was particularly acute in the Air Corps which, frankly, did not have enough pilots. That has been turned around in the past 12 months or so and it now has enough pilots. As Members are aware, there are particular problems in the Naval Service. Ships that should be going to sea are tied up because there are insufficient crews and specialties in terms of skill sets to crew them. That is not acceptable to me or this House. We have been working with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to try to address some of those issues and we are continuing to do so.

Likewise, investment is required in certain areas of the Army. It is often the case in politics that when things are done they tend to get banked and people move on to the next thing. A significant amount of implementation of the plan is already in place and signed off on. There are some matters outstanding but we are prioritising getting them done as quickly as possible. There are other things that need to be done beyond the plan, which is why we are putting a commission in place which it is hoped will be set up in the coming three or four weeks, ahead of schedule. That will be a clear statement to the Defence Forces that we are prioritising the upcoming commission and the work it will do.

**Deputy Peadar Táibín:** I acknowledge the Minister stated things have been done, but this issue did not arise overnight. It is not the case that people have just put in requests for these changes. This is not recent analysis on the weakening and reduction of the Defence Forces. The Minister rightly indicated that it is quite shocking. It is amazing that ships are currently tied up because crews are not available to deliver services on them. I refer to the working time directive, which I will discuss at a later stage. That legislation dates from 1997 and was the subject of a court case in 2010. It is now 2020 and we are still wondering when the implementation will be ready. I understand the Minister cannot do everything overnight but these are critical issues and I am asking that he meet the representative organisations to ensure the measures are fully implemented.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I do not wish to pretend that just because I am now Minister for Defence everything is different. My Department has been working with representative organisations to get many things done relating to the reports that have been completed. I am looking at a list of projects, most of which are complete and some of which are under way. Some of the asks of the report were for reviews etc. There are some asks which will be considered under the new round of pay negotiations and so on. It is important to state that much has been achieved because often the narrative around the Defence Forces focuses on what is not working and what has not been achieved. Sometimes that contributes to our recruitment challenge because of the impression that is being given.

There are real problems. We are trying to address them and I intend addressing them head on. Some of them involve resources and money and some involve ensuring we have open terms of reference for this upcoming commission and we appoint top-class people to that commission to make sure the work the commission will do over a 12-month period or so can impact significantly on the future of the Defence Forces. It is an exciting time to be Minister for Defence. We have problems to solve but we also have robust mechanisms with which to do that.

### **Departmental Properties**

3. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence if the site of Columb Barracks, Mullingar, will be examined as the potential national headquarters of the Army Reserve forces as part of a strategic State and Defence Forces role. [28524/20]

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** In 2012, Columb Barracks in Mullingar ceased to be permanently occupied by the Defence Forces. Since then, there have been periods of local use by sporting bodies, An Garda Síochána and other valued and valuable community groups. Despite neglect by Government since its closure, the barracks, with its historical buildings on a large site, continues to have enormous potential. Unfortunately, it continues to fall into disrepair. It is now time to re-envision the future of Columb Barracks in Mullingar as a national headquarters for



the Reserve Defence Force. I ask the Minister to examine this proposal as a matter of urgency.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The Government recognises the importance of the role of the Reserve Defence Force, RDF, in contributing to Ireland's defence capability. The White Paper on Defence is clear that there is a continued requirement to retain and develop the RDF and it is currently on a developmental path arising from the recommendations of the White Paper.

The primary roles allocated to the Reserve remain to augment the Permanent Defence Force, PDF, in crisis situations and to contribute to State ceremonial events. The commitments in the White Paper serve to underpin these important roles.

The programme for Government contains a commitment to establish an independent commission on the Defence Forces. I referred to this earlier. This commission will examine the role and contribution of the RDF, including its legislation, the regulations governing the RDF, the development of the first-line Reserve, and whether specialists from the RDF should be able to serve overseas. I have made comments in response to Deputy Cathal Berry's questions on this issue and on whether we should accommodate it in the legislation on defence that is coming through the Dáil.

The assignment in 2018 of responsibility of director of Reserve Defence Forces to the director of combat support and intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance, ISTAR, based in Defence Forces headquarters, has allowed for the provision of guidance, across all units and formations with RDF assets, in developing their capabilities. This is in line with the single force concept and the role of the Reserve as described in the White Paper. The focus is to harness RDF skills and talent, maximising its potential development on the basis of mutual engagement with the PDF. Specific project areas focus on training, regulation, recruitment, retention and promotions and are supported through RDF and PDF reciprocal training, mentoring and education.

In relation to Columb Barracks, it is the assessment of the Department that it is no longer required for military purposes. The current financial and administrative burden resulting from its retention cannot be sustained forever. For this reason, my officials have been proceeding with the disposal of the barracks in line with Government policy. They have been working with the new Land Development Agency on that process. I will come back to it because I am sure the Deputy will have questions on it. The site certainly has considerable potential. The barracks was closed in 2012, which is some time ago. The whole point of the Land Development Agency is to try to maximise for the State the potential of strategic sites such as this one. That is probably where the focus needs to be now.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** The Reserve has always played a pivotal, if somewhat undervalued, role in the history of the State and the Defence Forces. We are now at a critical junction where a decision needs to be made on both the Reserve Defence Force and Columb Barracks. The investment in development and education, particularly for the youth, in experience in military lifestyles and military skills is best evidenced in the Reserve. It encompasses positive life choices that we want for our younger people, for example, healthy living, dedication to others, skills and leadership building.

When the Defence Forces reorganised in 2012, most elements of the Reserve were twinned with a parent regular unit. In theory, this leads to greater integration, but we live in the real world, not theory. This concept only works where there is a genuine commitment on the part

of the State to develop the Defence Forces. I think we can all agree that the commitment level needed by the Defence Forces has not been met in previous years. We are now at a pivotal stage of considering the geographical location of Columb Barracks and how the barracks could meet the need of the Reserve Defence Force while also meeting other needs.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** As the Deputy will be aware, since the closure of Columb Barracks in 2012, my Department has explored a number of avenues to try to secure its long-term future for the benefit of the local community which is, ultimately, what every asset should be about. Departments and other public bodies, including Westmeath County Council, have been invited to declare an interest in acquiring the property. However, no interest was expressed from any of these bodies.

In May 2016, officials from my Department attended a public meeting in Mullingar on the future use of the barracks. A local group was subsequently established to prepare a feasibility study on the community use of the premises. For all sorts of reasons, a report from that group has not been furnished to the Department. This is not about blaming anybody. We have tried and we had a lengthy process of exploring options for use of the barracks that could add positively to the local community and the area.

More recently, the Land Development Agency, on its establishment, was tasked with developing an initial tranche of eight sites, which were seen as strategic sites nationally, including the barracks in Mullingar. Since the establishment of the Land Development Agency, the Department has actively engaged with it on the modalities associated with legal transfers, etc. We will continue to work as best we can but it is important that I do not raise expectations around the military use of the barracks in the future because that may not be the direction of travel.

I am interested in developing the potential and capacity of the Reserve Defence Force. The Reserve is under strength and I hope we will be able to change that in the months ahead. As I say, I am certainly open to new thinking with regard to how the Reserve functions and its role complementing the Defence Forces both at home and, potentially, abroad. We have started that conversation within the Department.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** When the Minister was looking at potential options for Columb Barracks, was a national headquarters for the Reserve one of those options? Mullingar occupies a strategically important geographical location. It is less than one hour from Dublin and less than 100 km from the Border. It is within easy reach of Carna, the Curragh and the Glen of Imaal. It has a multitude of land suitable for small and large-scale military exercises. It is close to lakes and rivers. It is ideal for water-based training. Most critically, it already has in place infrastructure to house military units and water units on a temporary occupation. Given the size of the site - I presume the Minister is familiar with the layout of Columb Barracks and how its existing structure is essentially landlocked by existing housing developments - it could be adapted to serve the needs of the Reserve, the groups that currently use the facility as well as other needs in the town.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** While I take the Deputy's point, I am loath to start raising expectations about Columb Barracks. The community groups currently using the barracks are Westmeath GAA, the Irish United Nations Veterans Association, Lakeshore Wheelers, the Order of Malta, Mullingar Boxing Club, a crafts school, Mullingar Sub Aqua Club, the north-Westmeath adult literacy service and a youth organisation. As I said, the Land Development Agency was established for a reason. It is looking at how we can

*11 o'clock*



maximise the use of strategic assets nationally. We must also protect the infrastructure that has already been put in place, which is very significant in the case of the barracks in Mullingar.

That is likely to be the way the future gets designed and implemented, through the LDA. We are there to support that process and offer any input that we can regarding some of the ideas the Deputy suggested.

*Question No. 4 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Defence Forces Representative Organisations**

**5. Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the details of the reasoning behind the ongoing refusal to allow members of the Defence Forces to form an association with a union (details supplied). [29077/20]

**Deputy John Brady:** I raise the Government's refusal to allow members of the Defence Forces to associate with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU. This has been a long-standing request, particularly from PDFORRA, since 1994. Will the Minister outline the rationale for this continued refusal?

**(Deputy Simon Coveney):** I have spoken to Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association, PDFORRA, on this previously and I am sure that I will do so again. Under the Defence Acts, 1954 to 2015, the permanent Defence Forces representative associations are prohibited from being associated with or affiliated with any trade unions or any other body without the consent of the Minister.

To compensate for these restrictions, there are a range of statutory redress mechanisms available to serving members, including redress of wrongs, a Defence Forces Ombudsman and a conciliation and arbitration scheme.

In 2017, the European Committee of Social Rights, in a non-binding ruling, found that Ireland was in violation of the European Social Charter in respect of the right to organise, that is to affiliate to certain organisations, and the right to negotiate collective agreements. It found that Ireland was not in violation of the charter in respect of the prohibition of the right of military personnel to strike.

The Government is aware of the long-standing desire of PDFORRA to associate with ICTU. However, association with ICTU poses complex questions for the Defence Forces from a legal, operational and management perspective. It is critically important that Defence Forces operations are not restricted and this is a key concern.

The European Committee of Social Rights, in arriving at its decision, took into account a statement made in the complaint which claimed that ICTU had stated that "PDFORRA could be affiliated to ICTU with whatever conditions the Government deemed necessary". Defence management, civil and military, have engaged in discussions with the permanent Defence Forces representative associations and ICTU regarding the practicalities of a Defence Forces representative association forming association or affiliation with ICTU. These discussions have encompassed matters of concern to all parties.

PDFORRA subsequently initiated legal proceedings on this matter on 26 June 2020. As this

matter is now subject to litigation, it would not be appropriate to comment further.

This is an issue I would rather was not in court and was not concluded by legal ruling. What we are trying to do in setting up a commission to look at all issues, including pay and structures within the Defence Forces, and the commitment in the programme for Government to set up a separate pay entity to assess pay within the Defence Forces after the initial commission's work is to recognise that serving in the Defence Forces is different to other public sector work. People take an oath to the State, they are the last line of defence for the State and compromises come with that. My job is to ensure that we more than take account of that in the structures that are there to represent Defence Forces personnel properly, whether that be in public sector pay talks or in any other area. I do not have a closed mind in this area but I have real concerns and will continue to speak to PDFORRA and other representative bodies about their concerns.

**Deputy John Brady:** The Minister will be well aware of how bad things are in the Defence Forces, something which several Members have mentioned earlier. The numbers of members of the Defence Forces who have to rely on the working family payment is a stark illustration of this and for public sector talks to go ahead with no input from members of the Defence Forces is not right. Unfortunately, legal proceedings had to be initiated because of the Government's heel dragging on the issue. It is not a route that anyone would like to go down, particularly members of the Defence Forces or their representative bodies.

Many European states allow members of their defence forces to engage with trade unions and enjoy the right to collective bargaining. It should be no different here. Many of the concerns that have been raised in the past have been addressed by PDFORRA and other representative bodies. Will the Minister outline his concerns? It is a fundamental right to be able to associate with a trade union.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The Deputy mentioned the number of Defence Force personnel that are on the working family payment. I understand there are as many people in my Department on working family payment as there are in the Defence Forces. The payment is calculated based on a range of factors. I do not want there to be an impression that members of the Defence Forces are the only people in the public sector that are on working family payment; that is just not true. Of course, we are looking at pay and conditions in the Defence Forces to try to ensure that it is an attractive career path and we can deal with the recruitment and retention issues that everyone knows has been a problem, but let us not exaggerate for effect, please, because that also has an impact, as I keep saying, on our ability to be able to attract people into the Defence Forces. Every time we talk about the Defence Forces in this House, the questions come up in a very negative light. My job is to be real and to accept problems when they are there. I do, and there are problems which we need to fix, but there are also very positive aspects for people who choose a career in the Defence Forces in what that career path offers.

I do not have a closed mind on this issue but my primary focus is to ensure that the Defence Forces are always there when we need them and that no decision I make can impede the ability of that response that we rely on the Defence Forces for. We need to ensure that concerns are reflected and that there are systems in place to support Defence Forces personnel in that regard.

**Deputy John Brady:** I find it absurd that the Minister would pit low-paid workers against each other, as though it is some badge of honour that staff in his Department rely on the working family payment. That is shameful and really low. The stark reality is this sector has no input into national pay agreements and must take the agreement or leave it, unlike other workers who

are allowed have representatives around the table.

An argument put forward is that it would be completely wrong if members of the Defence Forces, having associated with ICTU, might go on strike. That red herring has been put forward time and again. PDFORRA has stated categorically that it has no intention of doing so and that it would withdraw if there were any concerns on that issue. The European Committee of Social Rights stated that the right to strike is incompatible with military service and PDFORRA completely accepts that argument. From my perspective, and that of the representative bodies, there are no reasons they cannot freely associate with ICTU. The Minister said he is open to it; now is the time to do it. No one wants to go down the route of taking legal proceedings, but they can be withdrawn if there is a commitment from the Department and the Government to allow the freedom to associate with ICTU. I ask that the Minister make that commitment on the floor of the Dáil.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I am not pitting anyone against anybody. That is not my style. That the Deputy would try to create that narrative reflects his approach to this issue. I am working hard to ensure that everyone in the Defence Forces is understood in terms of the frustrations and challenges he or she faces and that we respond to those financially and from a policy perspective. This is what I am doing to try to ensure that we can attract the numbers and talent we need into the Defence Forces. I am not pitting anyone against anybody. I am simply giving the Deputy the factual position on the working family payment. Unfortunately, he chooses to try to twist that into something else.

It is important to say that representative bodies in the Defence Forces will have representation in this round of pay negotiations. I will ensure that. It does not necessarily mean being affiliated to ICTU, but those bodies will be heard and they will be in the room to make their case. Not only that, but we are setting up a structure separately to the pay negotiations to consider the specifics of serving in the Defence Forces. Not only have we committed to setting up a commission to consider the future of the Defence Forces as well as all of these issues, but we are committing to establishing a pay body specifically to consider the future of Defence Forces personnel's pay and conditions.

Please do not give the impression that we are not trying to prioritise Defence Forces personnel. We absolutely are trying to prioritise them, recognising that they play a unique role in public and national service. I do not have a closed mind on the question of whether their representative bodies being affiliated to ICTU enhances that process but I have not been convinced by the arguments. People have a right to take legal challenges, but the issue that will determine this for me is the question of what is the right thing to do for the Defence Forces and the country in the context of the role the Defence Forces play.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Defence Forces Personnel**

**6. Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Defence when the working time directive will be implemented in the Defence Forces in order to ensure safe working conditions, increased work life balance and retention. [29117/20]

14. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the progress that has been made to date regarding the commitment in the programme for Government to amend the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997, to bring the Defence Forces within its scope of provisions. [28527/20]

43. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence when will the working time directive will be implemented in the Defence Forces. [29142/20]

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** I must be strict about time so that as many Deputies can speak as possible.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Organisation of Working Time Act dates from 1997, there was a European Court of Justice, ECJ, decision in 2010 and no negotiations have happened since July 2019. In anyone's measure, that level of progress is glacial. When will the working time directive be implemented to ensure safe working conditions, increased work-life balance and, importantly, retention?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 6, 14 and 43 together.

I share some of the Deputies' concerns on this issue. Since I am taking three questions together, I hope that the Acting Chairman will give me a little extra time.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** The Minister has four minutes.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The EU working time directive has been transposed into national legislation by way of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997. As the House will be aware, the Defence Forces are excluded from the provisions of the Act. However, it is important to say that the Government has committed to amending this Act and bringing the Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána within the scope of its provisions. There is no resistance to that.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has responsibility for introducing this legislative change. My Department has worked closely with that Department to progress the legislative changes required. I am advised that responsibility for this legislation will transfer to the new Department of enterprise, trade and employment in the near future and work on progressing the requisite legislative changes will continue with that Department.

The working time directive recognises the unique nature of certain military activities and allows for derogations and exemptions of such activities. A significant amount of work has been undertaken by civil and military management in determining the military activities that fall within the scope of the directive. I am advised that a high percentage of the normal everyday work of the Defence Forces is already in compliance with the working time directive and that a range of activities also qualify for exemption. Deliberations on these matters are continuing between civilian and military management and will feed into amendments to the legislative framework.

A subcommittee of the conciliation and arbitration council, one comprising the representative associations and military and civil management, has been established to discuss matters relating to implementation of the working time directive. Arising from these discussions, amended practices regarding compensatory rest have been introduced. This builds upon existing work practices relating to compensatory rest that comply with the directive. Discussions with the Defence Forces representative associations will continue to be undertaken through this

forum as the current work evolves.

My Department and the Defence Forces remain fully committed to ensuring that the provisions of the directive are applied throughout the Defence Forces. I assure the Deputies that the health and safety of personnel in the Defence Forces remain a priority for me and the Chief of Staff.

We are committed to doing this. Mine is not the primary Department introducing legislation. It will change from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to the future Department of jobs. I assure the Deputies that I will pursue this issue and try to move it on in as timely a manner as we can. There has already been considerable discussion, as well as a structure to facilitate that discussion, to ensure that we are doing what we can to act in the spirit of the working time directive before we introduce the amending legislation to get it done in law.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The working family payment, which is relevant in this context, is an admission by the State that a person's income is not enough to survive on. That is a shocking admission. The fact that members of the Defence Forces are being paid such an income while being excluded from the provisions of the working time directive and doing many more hours than 48 hours per week is incredible. The ECJ has stated that there is no blanket exemption and other European defence forces have implemented the directive.

An incredible number of people in the Defence Forces do incredibly serious, technical and dangerous jobs. Bomb disposal officers can be on call for 168 hours per week. Portlaoise duty officers can be on call for 72 hours. Individuals in the Naval Service can be on duty for two to four weeks. These are incredible outliers in terms of normal working practices.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The working family payment exists for a reason. It recognises the need for increased income and support from the State for people who are on low pay. It is a safety net, as it were, for people in certain family situations. Obviously, it is not the responsibility of my Department primarily, but it is an important safety net.

We need to reflect constantly on pay levels across the Defence Forces, and that is what we are doing. It is why we are establishing a commission and have committed to establishing a pay and conditions body specifically to examine these issues within the Defence Forces.

We are committed to passing legislation in respect of the working time directive as it relates to the Defence Forces and the Garda. The reason the directive is more complicated to implement in the Defence Forces is self-evident. If one is off the west coast in February on patrol on a naval vessel, it is pretty difficult to fully comply with the working time directive for all roles. We need to have derogations and exceptions, which I understand are catered for in the working time directive, for military service. Between now and when the legislation is amended, we want to implement the spirit of what we will legislate for as best we can. That is why the representative bodies are part of that discussion

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is a major health and safety issue. The objective of the directive is also to provide for the greater compatibility of work with family life, which is massively important for everybody, but the non-adherence to the directive is also a key driver in Defence Forces personnel leaving. This is not an effort from us to talk down the Defence Forces. It is a demand, a request, a shout and a plea from the Defence Forces themselves. There has been a significant loss of personnel from all ranks in the Defence Forces.



The Minister mentioned that it is practically difficult to configure naval personnel who are off the west coast in the Atlantic Ocean for weeks on end but their hours can be averaged over a period of three, six or 12 months. That could be done in such a way as to give them time off in lieu to allow them to still adhere to the directive. A functioning military service and functioning Defence Forces are not incongruent to adherence to the directive.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** Does Deputy Clarke wish to make a short input on this?

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I have listened with some interest to the reply the Minister gave to Deputy Tóibín. I am hearing - and serving members will be hearing this as well - about commissions and reviews and I am hearing claims that the Government is working on this, that it is all in hand and that the Government will get there eventually. Do we have any idea of a definitive timeline? Is it realistic to say to somebody serving in the Defence Forces that if his or her child is born tomorrow, the State will be in adherence with the working time directive by the time of that child's first holy communion? This has been going on for so long. What commitment can the Minister give to even an estimated timeline for when this work will be finished?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** We are committed to the legislation and I do not see why it has to take an eternity to get it done. We will push to try to get that legislation amended as quickly as we can. We are not waiting for the legislation, however. Compensatory rest is provided for certain duties and this is also in line with the provisions of the directive. We are talking to the representative bodies about that and I have outlined some of the structures that happens in. We are listening to them, we are trying to put supports in place and we are trying to ensure that, while everybody recognises that there are exemptions for serving Defence Forces personnel, we need to try to act in a way that is consistent with the working time directive, even in the absence of the legislation being finalised. That is what we are trying to do. I assure the Deputies that I will push for this amending legislation as soon as is reasonable.

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

7. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of Defence Forces personnel with expertise in security, process development and threat intelligence assessment seconded to the national security analysis centre, NASC, in view of the recognised potential and important role of the Defence Forces in the national cybersecurity strategy as outlined in the programme for Government. [28525/20]

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** The current national cybersecurity strategy, which was published in December last and runs until 2025, refers to the need to improve the ability of the State to respond to and to manage cybersecurity incidents, including those with a national security component, and to identify and protect critical national infrastructure by increasing resilience to cyberattack. Given some of the most skilled and qualified cyberdefence experts are in our Defence Forces, how many of them are seconded to the NASC?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I thank the Deputy for raising this question because it is an important one. Arising from the recommendations in the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing, a new national security analysis centre was established during 2019 under the aegis of the Department of the Taoiseach. The purpose of the new centre is to co-ordinate between the various State bodies with national security functions and to provide strategic analysis for the

Government on security threats.

Defence policy and operations form a centrally important aspect of this work, given the nature of the threat environment. In this regard, NSAC commenced work on the development of a national security strategy in 2019. The strategy will aim to set out a whole-of-government approach for how the State can protect its national security and vital interests from current and emerging threats. An expert policy forum and a public consultation process have provided significant inputs for this process. While further consultation has been constrained by the restrictions necessitated by Covid-19, the centre has continued its research activity in this regard over the recent months.

A director has been appointed to lead the NSAC and a number of support staff have been appointed. A number of personnel with a range of expertise have been assigned from the partner bodies to the centre, including two experienced personnel from the defence organisation, one civil and one military, who were seconded in 2019.

The national cybersecurity centre, NCSC, which is part of the Department with responsibility for the environment, climate and communications, is the primary authority responsible for cybersecurity in the State, including incident response, cyber resilience and information provision. The NCSC maintains a significant threat intelligence capability and this is a key tool in the work of the NCSC in mitigating risks to the State and its people from cybersecurity threats. The NCSC works closely with the Defence Forces in this regard. While the primary role of the Defence Forces with regard to cybersecurity relates to the defence and security of its own networks and systems, the defence organisation is committed to participating in the delivery of measures to improve the cybersecurity of the State. This is being done in line with the programme for Government commitment to implement the national cybersecurity strategy.

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

Ireland's current national cybersecurity strategy was published in December 2019 and follows on from the country's first strategy, which issued in 2015. There is a particular emphasis in the strategy on improving the protection of government ICT and other critical national infrastructure; on education, research and training, and on enhancing Ireland's international engagement. My Department and the Defence Forces have inputted to the development of this strategy. Department officials and the Defence Forces are also actively involved in the implementation of the new strategy which, in conjunction with the White Paper on Defence 2015, will continue to inform our engagement in this critical area. This includes work to develop an updated and detailed risk assessment of the current vulnerability of all critical national infrastructure and services to cyberattacks and the provision of a member of the Defence Forces for secondment to the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, Estonia. In addition, my Department actively participates on the interdepartmental committee overseeing implementation of the strategy, which is chaired by the Department with responsibility for the Environment, Climate and Communications.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** The White Paper on Defence, produced in 2015 and amended in 2019, identified hybrid attacks or cyberattacks and threats to the cyber domain and from espionage have been assessed as increasing since 2015, while the wider political and global environment is more complex and uncertain. We have seen similar attacks in Britain on the UK National Health Service, which was a specific and targeted attack. Organised crime is seen as on a par with terrorism by the UN office on terrorism and terrorism prevention in terms of threats.

Why then does the NCSC fall under the remit of the Department of environment, climate and communications, and not under the Departments of Justice and Equality or Defence? The Minister has referred to security and An Garda Síochána as having been a key tool. It seems to be a piece of a jigsaw that is slightly misaligned with where the NCSC is sitting.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I can understand that concern and I have asked that question because it was when I was last in the Department of Defence that we put together the White Paper. At that time, there was a discussion within government on national security infrastructure, how the Defence Forces interact with An Garda Síochána and how we can respond to an emerging cybersecurity threat. There is significant expertise in the Department with responsibility for the environment, climate and communications from a communications perspective, which is essentially the platform for cybersecurity attacks. One could argue for the NCSC to come under the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Defence or the Department with responsibility for the environment, climate and communications or for central co-ordination from the Taoiseach. The decision was made, after a lot of discussion, that the national cybersecurity centre should come under the Department with responsibility for the environment, climate and communications because we are talking about communications networks being intercepted and compromised by security threats.

I understand the argument the Deputy is making but there is significant expertise in that Department. Most important, the message is that the NCSC is about pulling together all of the expertise from different Departments, including the Defence Forces as well as the Department of Defence, to make sure we have a central office that is using all of the expertise available to make sure we are protecting the interests of the State from cybersecurity attacks, which are a significant threat internationally. Ireland rates well internationally and we are learning from others. There is a European centre of excellence in Tallinn, Estonia, which we are interacting with to make sure we are fully up to speed with the kind of response that is needed.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** The Minister mentioned State infrastructure there but it is more than State infrastructure. It includes State assets as well. I recognise, however, that he referenced the continual learning because that is critical when it comes to issues such as this.

Ireland has a high level of foreign direct investment. We have multinational corporations here that are household names. The investment they have made here is colossal. However, in terms of State protection that can be offered to them, it seems like very little to none. Foreign direct investment alone, as one entity, needs assurance that at the very least, our national electricity grid is protected from a cyberattack. Is this an assurance the Minister can reasonably give and reasonably stand over? Foreign direct investors also assume that our national technical means are of a standard that is fit for purpose in the current environment in 2020 and that we properly monitor our cyberdomain and our digital space. Is that a reassurance the Minister can give to them and stand over?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I think “Yes” is the answer to that question. I do not believe there is a country in the world, even the superpowers of the world, that can give an absolute 100% guarantee against the threat of cybersecurity challenges. There is not. We have seen such attacks on the United States of America and in China. Even the countries that spend hundreds of billions on this issue are not absolutist in the guarantees they can give. Having said that, the Deputy has asked if we can assume a reasonable level of assurance and I think we can. In our cybersecurity strategy, we recognise that Ireland has a significant international presence in this area. A lot of data are managed and held in Ireland in very large data centres. Many communi-

cations and IT companies are based in Ireland managing sensitive and confidential data from all over the world. We have focused on this area in a way that prioritises it significantly. We can give a reasonable level of reassurance on the policy response in that regard.

### **Defence Forces Reserve**

**8. Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the proposed enlistment number for the Reserve Defence Force for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29128/20]

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** It is essential that Ireland has the maximum possible enlistment in the Reserve Defence Force. I fully appreciate that recruitment during a pandemic is not straightforward. The Minister has heard me say previously in this House and at committees that the role of the Reserve Defence Force, and prior to that the Forsa Cosanta Áitiúil, FCA, has never been given due recognition. In the area I come from I am very conscious of the good work done by the FCA and the Reserve Defence Force in ensuring an outlet for young people, and particularly young vulnerable people who may have got into wrong company and associated with undesirable groups in the past. The FCA did exceptional work in ensuring a good outlet for many young people. Subsequently, those young people were able to go on to have distinguished careers in the Permanent Defence Force.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I thank Deputy Smith, I know he has a particular interest in this area. The Government recognises the important role that the Reserve Defence Force, RDF, plays in contributing to Ireland's defence capability. The White Paper on Defence sets out a blueprint for the development of the RDF and that its primary role is to support the Permanent Defence Force in crisis situations.

The Army Reserve, AR, and Naval Service Reserve, NSR, has a combined establishment of 4,069 personnel, which is 3,869 for the Army Reserve and 200 for the Naval Service Reserve. A key ongoing challenge for the AR and NSR is to recruit and retain personnel and I am aware that there continues to be a shortfall between the current strength figures and those of the establishment. We are trying to address this.

I am advised by the military authorities that recruitment is ongoing and a recruitment campaign for the Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve was opened in March of this year. Assessments are continuing at formation level and, while there are no specific dates yet, it is anticipated that another recruitment campaign will be opened in autumn 2020 with two further recruitment campaigns in spring and autumn 2021.

I understand that 2018 and 2019 saw inductions totalling 142 and 144, respectively, into the RDF, however, the ability to conduct RDF inductions this year has been impacted by the Covid-19 public health pandemic. Nevertheless, 63 additional new members have been inducted thus far this year, with 57 inducted into the Army Reserve and six inducted into the Naval Service Reserve.

Supports being provided to maximise recruitment to the Reserve include the use of social media and outreach activities by RDF members. The Permanent Defence Force exit interviews now also contain information on applying for membership of the RDF. The Government remains committed to increasing the strength of the AR and NSR and to further developing the

Reserve.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Minister. It is essential that the recruitment numbers are more substantial than the number of retirements. I understand there has been a substantial number of retirements in recent years. Naturally, this will occur again.

I advocated at previous committees that a more aggressive recruitment campaign is needed and perhaps a focus on second-level schools, colleges of further education and third level colleges.

I believe that currently there is no engagement between the Permanent Defence Force and the Reserve due to the pandemic. It is important that a plan be put in place for a return to training, with all the necessary safety guidelines. The Permanent Defence Force needs to have that engagement with the Reserve members, and members need to be involved in training. If there is no ongoing training activity, skills will be lost and it will be very difficult to replace such skills. I seek assurance from the Minister that a level of training within the necessary safety guidelines can be put back in place. I know some young people who are training as members of the Permanent Defence Force and there should be some engagement and some level of training for the Reserve members also.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I take that point but we also have to do it within the parameters and constraints of public health guidelines and so on. This even impacts on my ability to visit barracks at the moment, for example, and in the numbers of serving personnel I can meet at any one time. We all have to try to lead by example in responding to the pandemic in a responsible way. This has impacted on some of the issues the Deputy has referred to.

We have a single Defence Forces concept committed to in the White Paper, which means that Reserve personnel should be training in a way that is complementary to the Permanent Defence Force, to ensure complete interoperability between the two so one supports the other. In the coming months I will be asking the upcoming commission to look at the role of the Reserve, how we can enhance that and how we can make it a more exciting option and choice for people who may want to join. I am certainly open to looking at specialties that can help to fill gaps and support in a complementary way to the Permanent Defence Force, and to allowing Reserve personnel to potentially work overseas also. This would significantly add to the attractiveness of joining the Reserve.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** When the Minister establishes the commission and appoints members, I hope that a person with detailed knowledge and association with the Reserve Defence Force over the years will be considered for membership of the commission. Often the Reserve is not given the attention it needs.

I fully agree and fully understand that we must be guided by the health and safety guidelines. That is absolutely essential. If we do not have some level of training, however, there will be a big wastage of skills. It would be very difficult to replace those skills and that knowledge in the future.

Unfortunately, given the medical opinions, we will all be living in a Covid-19 environment for some time. We must develop new ways of training and doing business. I appeal to the Minister to give this matter attention. If engagement is not resumed for the Reserve Defence Force its value and the recognition it needs in society will be lost also. It is extremely important, within the safety and health guidelines, that training activity is resumed if at all possible.



**Deputy Simon Coveney:** People do not join the Reserve to do nothing. They are not there just to say they are a member of the Reserve. They join up because they want to be part of the action and to make a contribution through training and putting that training to use. This is why we have a Reserve. As of the end of August, the effective strength of the Army Reserve was 1,501 in personnel and that of the Naval Service Reserve was 123. We are significantly below where we would like to be in terms of the establishment numbers.

What is required is a really proactive recruitment campaign that is public, targets the right people and offers, through a communications campaign, options that will interest and excite people and encourage them to join up. We are going to focus on both elements.

## Naval Service

9. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Defence his views on reports that personnel are leaving the Naval Service to join the Army due to issues related to pay and conditions; his views on the impact this will have on the Naval Service; his further views on pay levels throughout the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29259/20]

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I ask the Minister to outline his views on reports that personnel are leaving the Naval Service to join the Army because of poor pay and conditions. What impact will this have on the Naval Service? I also ask him to outline his views on pay levels throughout the sector.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** As the Deputy knows, I have been spending a lot of time trying to understand and address some of the current challenges in the Naval Service. Personnel in the Naval Service are paid basic pay, military service allowance and, where appropriate, technical pay at the same rates as their colleagues in the Army and Air Corps. Enlisted personnel of the Naval Service also receive naval pay.

I am aware of reports that a small number of personnel have left the Naval Service in recent times to pursue a career in the Army. This can be for a variety of reasons, including career progression or personal circumstances. The range of duties undertaken differs across the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service. Where there is commonality, such as base security duties, the same duty rates are paid. However, members of the Naval Service undertake seagoing duty which differs from duties undertaken by other members of the Defence Forces. When on their two-year seagoing rotation, members of the Naval Service can be away from home on a regular basis. For this reason and because of the nature of the duty, seagoing service can prove unattractive. Jobs in the private sector and elsewhere which do not require such absences at sea have proved attractive for members of the Naval Service, both new entrants and more experienced personnel.

Naval Service personnel undertaking seagoing duties are paid a patrol duty allowance for each patrol day that they undertake. This is in addition to their basic pay, military service allowance, naval pay and technical pay, where applicable. An increase of 2% on annualised salaries is being implemented from 1 October 2020 under the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020. The 5% cut in allowances imposed under the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest, FEMPI, legislation is also being reversed from 1 October this year. This will benefit Naval Service personnel with an increase in the daily patrol duty allowance to €56.14 per day for personnel enlisted prior to January 2013, €59.09 per day for personnel enlisted after

January 2013 and €58.86 per day for officers. Each ship has a target of 165 patrol days each year. A special tax credit was introduced on a one-off exceptional basis in the Finance Act 2019 to incentivise seagoing duties. A seagoing naval personnel tax credit of €1,270 applies for the 2020 tax year and is based on the number of days served at sea in 2019.

I assure the Deputy that we are continuing to work with the Naval Service to find ways of ensuring that we can enhance even further the attractiveness of committing to go to sea.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** First, I commend the valuable work done by our serving personnel on our behalf at home and abroad. I particularly applaud the co-ordination role they have played during the pandemic. I posed this question today because reports indicate that a recent scheduled maritime patrol did not take place because of a lack of personnel. It is also my understanding that this was not an isolated event. I ask the Minister to assure the House that key matters dealt with by our Naval Service, like the interception of illegal drugs, are not being compromised.

I am also aware that the sums involved in the pay restoration under FEMPI are meagre and are unlikely to make much of a difference to the lives of those considering leaving the Naval Service. In recent years, there have been media reports of serving personnel in our Defence Forces having to sleep in their cars because they could not afford to travel the distances required of them. What is the position regarding pay restoration for our Defence Forces? What is the position with regard to improvements in their pay and why are they so underappreciated? The Minister made a promise in mid-July to deal with this issue because he acknowledged that members of the Defence Forces are among the lowest paid of our public servants.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The straight answer to the straight question as to whether the role of the Naval Service is being compromised is “Yes”. We have a fleet of nine ships. One of them is in service and two are tied up because we do not have sufficient personnel to crew them. Let us call a spade a spade; we have a serious problem in the Naval Service. The service is not at full strength and cannot perform the functions expected of it were it at full strength, although it is doing very well to compensate for that in terms of the work it is doing. The service is highly efficient in the way it operates at sea and on land.

We have a White Paper and a Government commitment to support a fleet that is below strength and that has consequences in terms of fisheries patrols and many of the other really important roles that the Naval Service plays. Despite all of that, the Naval Service has still managed to add significantly to national efforts to respond to Covid-19, including testing on the dock and so on. This shows the flexibility and professionalism of our Defence Forces in general and the Naval Service in particular. However, the *status quo* is not acceptable. We need to be more impactful in a positive way in terms of retention and recruitment in the Naval Service to deal with the shortage of personnel and I am focused on trying to resolve that issue.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** We all accept that Defence Forces personnel have been underpaid which is why many are leaving to take up other employment. Has the Department drawn up any projections regarding the implications if this trend continues? In particular, has it analysed the impact low personnel numbers will have on the overall size of our Defence Forces and the security implications of same? What is needed to attract former personnel or new recruits in order to restore the strength of our Defence Forces to an adequate level? Finally, will additional demands be placed on our Naval Service when Britain leaves the EU, particularly if new arrangements regarding EU fishing waters have to be put in place?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** In response to the Deputy's final question, there could be additional demands on the service but people like me and others must try to ensure that we reach a deal on fisheries, trade and a level playing field and fair competition before the end of the year. Those three areas will either all be agreed or none will be agreed, frankly. They come as a package, in parallel. In the absence of an agreement on fisheries, we will have a very complex problem on our hands at sea in terms of tension between fleets and we will need to manage that as best we can. That will obviously put pressure on the Naval Service.

Not for the first time, I am on record as saying that I am focused on trying to address the particular problems in the Naval Service. We have a whole range of other issues that need to be addressed across the Defence Forces generally but the Naval Service is a particular problem right now. This time last year, the Air Corps was a particular problem but a solution was found. We need to get our fleet back up to a more acceptable strength and get our ships back out to sea. To do that, we need to devise an impactful strategy to retain personnel and stop them leaving, and also to recruit former members of the service as well as new serving personnel. We are focusing on that and will be launching a specific strategy to do that in the next few days or weeks. We are also working on a support package to try to achieve our aims. These things are not easy but they are important.

### **Public Sector Pensions**

10. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Defence the way in which he plans to bridge the gap of ten years between forced early retirement on age grounds in the Defence Forces and access to the State pension. [29137/20]

26. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to extend the supplementary pension provision to post-2013 new entrants to give them the option of a lengthy career in the Defence Forces. [29138/20]

46. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Defence the way in which he plans to bridge the gap of ten years between forced early retirement on age grounds and access to the State pension. [29118/20]

**Deputy John Lahart:** I thank the Acting Chairman, Deputy Durkan, for facilitating my move from gamekeeper to poacher for a minute or two.

As the Minister knows, members of the Defence Forces are forced to retire at the age of 50. What plans has he to help them bridge that gap of ten years until they reach pension age?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 10, 26 and 46 together.

I take it the Deputy is referring to the absence of the concept of "supplementary pensions" from the provisions of the single public service pension scheme. The occupational pension scheme terms for post-1 January 2013 new entrants to the public service, including the permanent Defence Force, PDF, are governed by the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012. All first-time new entrants to pensionable public service employment on or after that date are members of the single scheme.

The single scheme is a key structural fiscal reform introduced to help significantly reduce the cost of public service pensions in the long term, while at the same time continuing to

provide valuable pension benefits for employees. In the general context of that policy objective, the terms and rules of the single scheme, which are fundamentally different to previous superannuation public service arrangements, make no provision for the concept or award of supplementary pensions for any new entrants joining any public service group from 1 January 2013 onwards. Notwithstanding the distinguishing features of the single scheme, members of the PDF in that scheme retain the minimum pension age of 50 to reflect operational needs, as already applies to new entrant military personnel recruited since April 2004. Importantly, the single scheme also retains “fast accrual” pension terms for groups such as the Defence Forces.

Under the 2012 Act, overall statutory responsibility for the single scheme pension terms and rules rests with my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. In that regard, the absence from the single scheme of provision for the concept of supplementary pensions for any new entrants joining any public service group, including the PDF, on or after 1 January 2013, has previously been confirmed by the official side to the Defence Forces representative associations, and the position in that regard has been restated to RACO by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform at a recent meeting with that association.

I am also advised that the Public Service Pay Commission considered certain aspects of military superannuation provisions, which were submitted as an influencing factor on military recruitment and-or retention outcomes. The commission’s report on recruitment and retention in the PDF, which was accepted in full by Government in July 2019, considered the concerns expressed by the military representative associations in relation to various aspects of pension scheme provisions for the Defence Forces. The commission made no recommendations advocating any improvements to the pension scheme terms of the PDF. However, the Public Service Pay Commission report recommended a range of measures relating to pay and non-pay aspects that would result in immediate and future benefits for members of the PDF. These projects are currently under way or completed. These include a review of barriers to extended participation in the PDF and, in particular, the possibility of extending or increasing retirement ages for members of the PDF. Phase 1 of this project, the review of mandatory retirement ages for commissioned officers, is nearing completion, while phase 2, the review of contracts of service for enlisted personnel, is commencing. However, while those deliberations are ongoing, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further. This is primarily the responsibility of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and I need to be careful what I say in this regard.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response, which contains some interesting material. He said he assumed I was referring exclusively to the supplementary pension provision but it is not just that. Obviously, as he said, the age of retirement reflects the duties involved and he also referred to the fast accrual system of pension for military personnel.

The final part of the reply refers to ongoing work on barriers and measures being considered to benefit members of the PDF. Does that include continued employment? The Minister talked about extending the contract but does this include assisting Defence Forces members to seek non-active positions within either the Department of Defence or the Defence Forces? Given the unique nature of Defence Forces personnel, to which he referred in earlier replies, and the fact they are treated differently in other ways, for example, with regard to union recognition, what creative measures are being considered? There is a long period remaining after a person ceases work at 50 and while some have particular skills they can take into other professions, and do, this is not always the case. Will the Minister respond regarding any creative solutions he is considering?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** As I said, a review and a conversation is ongoing in terms of required retirement ages. As the Deputy knows, there is a reason many in the Defence Forces are required to retire at a certain age. It is a challenging career, so there are age constraints in regard to some of the work that is done. That said, we are discussing and reviewing this at the moment. Many people in their 50s and 60s have pursued successful careers in the private sector and, indeed, the public sector after leaving the Defence Forces. That is with good reason because they are highly sought after, by and large. It is a problem for us at the moment because they are so sought after by the private sector that we are struggling to hold on to some of them, whether in the Naval Service or the Air Corps, where our pilots were essentially being head-hunted by private airlines. Because we train the Defence Forces very well, there are career options after people leave, particularly for officers but also for others, in particular as that skillset and discipline towards work are highly sought after. That is a kind of double-edged sword from our perspective. If the Deputy has any ideas or proposals in that regard, I will try to take them on board.

### **Defence Forces Strength**

**11. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which measures have been taken, or are being taken, to bring the strength of the Defence Forces, including the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps, up to its optimum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29112/20]

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** The military authorities have advised that the whole-time equivalent strength of the Permanent Defence Force at 31 August 2020 was 8,374 personnel, comprised of Army, 6,763; Air Corps, 716; and Naval Service, 895. I am aware that there continues to be a shortfall between the overall current strength figures and those of the establishment and I am committed to restoring the strength of the Defence Forces to 9,500, which is the figure in the White Paper. The Public Service Pay Commission report and implementation of the high level plan, Strengthening Our Defence Forces - Phase 1, is a key part of the response to address recruitment and retention challenges and my responses to other questions today detail this.

I accept there are ongoing difficulties in the Defence Forces, and these have been well-documented. The reduction in the number of operational ships due to personnel shortages is a case in point and is one area where I believe further measures are required. The inability to induct recruits at previous levels as a result of Covid is also an aggravating factor. However, there are also positive developments which are restoring capacity in areas which were significantly depleted. By way of example, overall officer numbers are just 13 off the full establishment figure as at 31 August 2020. While I appreciate that experience levels have declined at some ranks and that gaps remain in certain areas, the continued attraction of officer cadets in what was a competitive jobs market is indicative of the continued attractiveness of such a career.

Further initiatives such as the recommissioning of former Air Corps pilots have also assisted in boosting the number of much-needed specialists. I understand that further specialist officers will be recommissioned. The re-enlistment of former enlisted personnel is another initiative that is to be welcomed. While the numbers being inducted are lower than initially anticipated, all will play an important role in restoring capacity.

The fact is that the restoration of capacity in the Defence Forces will take time. The pro-



programme for Government provides that a commission on the Defence Forces will be tasked with examining a range of issues. This will provide an opportunity to chart the future direction of the Defence Forces. There is also a commitment to establish a pay review body specifically for the Defence Forces when the commission has completed its work.

Working closely with the Secretary General, the Chief of Staff and a range of other key stakeholders including the representative bodies, I am confident that the current challenges facing the Defence Forces can be overcome, although it will take some time. I appreciate colleagues' comments on all of these issues.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Following its meeting on Sunday, the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, wrote to Government to outline their concerns about the increasing number of Covid cases throughout the State. It was, and still is, an extremely worrying situation. Since the weekend, there have been a number of large clusters in nursing homes, including one in Convoy in my own constituency. The rate of admissions to hospital has been on the rise and the number of Covid-19 cases in ICU has risen, as has the number of patients on ventilators. This is all reflected in the comments of the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, Dr. Tony Holohan, yesterday who said that his level of concern on Sunday was lower than his current level of concern.

Since then, instead of setting out a plan to deal with the situation in our hospitals, the Government has allowed a narrative to prevail that this is everybody's fault bar their own. The Tánaiste said on RTÉ television that NPHET's advice was landed upon him as a surprise. We now know that is not the case. The CMO organised an extraordinary meeting of NPHET on Sunday and informed the Minister for Health of this on Saturday. He spoke to the Minister before and after the NPHET meeting. He did everything he could have to keep the Government in the loop. It was only when NPHET's recommendations made their way to Government that they were leaked. For 24 hours afterwards, the Government said nothing. When the Tánaiste did say something on national television, it was to engage in distraction and a sideshow. He played the man instead of the ball.

In all of this time the Minister for Health stayed schtum. He said nothing and allowed the perception to prevail that this had all come out of the blue. Most significantly, since then he has said nothing about increasing capacity in our hospitals. That is the real issue here.

We are unprepared for a surge in our hospitals due to the lack of capacity. The winter plan the Government published is insufficient, as everybody knows. The Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, has said that the winter plan will not be enough. Its president, Dr. Pádraig McGarry, said that shutting down elective care to deal with any winter surge is not an option given the impact of delayed diagnosis, delayed treatment and ever-increasing waiting lists for outpatient appointments, inpatient day cases and investigative procedures. This lack of capacity and lack of beds is the crux of the problem.

The Tánaiste might talk about surge capacity and so on in his reply but we know that the knock-on effects of this approach will be absolutely catastrophic for the health service. He

knows that and so do I. We need to tackle this issue head-on and to tackle it now. Does the Tánaiste accept that ICU capacity is a major issue? Does he also accept that the current plan is completely insufficient to deal with a second surge without having a massive impact on non-Covid care? Crucially, what is he going to do about it?

**The Tánaiste:** Covid is nobody's fault. Nobody in the Government is engaging in any sort of blame game. That is the game of others. This is a virus. Nobody is to blame for it whether here or north of the Border. I will not speak for the Minister, Deputy Donnelly; I understand he is to issue a statement later in the day. I can, however, speak for the Government and for myself. I can give the facts. Nobody in Government had any indication that consideration was being given to recommending a move to level 5 until Sunday. This was confirmed by the CMO at last night's press conference. It was a shock; it did come out of the blue. We were not prepared for it nor was the country.

What do I mean by "out of the blue"? The recommendation came on Sunday, only three days after NPHET had said in writing that it did not strongly support a move to level 3 nationally at that time. It was also not in line with the parameters set out in the Government's framework - a leaflet explaining it has gone through every door in the country. Under this framework, restrictions are to be escalated in steps. The criteria for reaching level 5 had not been met. A decision of such gravity needs to be talked through and thought through. I refer not only to the reasons for such a decision, but its implications for people, the exit strategy and co-ordination with Northern Ireland.

To clarify and to be very clear, the Taoiseach, the leader of the Green Party and I were informed on Saturday that a meeting of NPHET had been called for Sunday. There was no suggestion, not even an inkling, that level 5 was being contemplated. Had we known that, we would have sought an urgent briefing that night. That is what could, and should, have happened. The first indication I had that level 5 was being considered came on Sunday evening, after the NPHET meeting had taken place. I received confirmation in writing at 8.30 p.m., setting out the recommendations and the reasons for them. For some Minister, the first they heard of this on the news.

I appreciate that the Deputy may want to make a big deal about which Minister knew what and at what time on Sunday but that is not the point. The point is that we had no indication that this was even being considered until Sunday. We need to move on from this. This should not be NPHET versus the Government or the Government versus the Opposition; this has to be Ireland versus the coronavirus.

The Government is acting in response to the escalating situation. We took the decision to move the entire country to level 3 only the other day and I believe the Deputy's party supports that decision and the decision not to go to level 5. If that is not the case, the Deputy may wish to say so. That decision is being implemented. We know that level 3 was successful in counties Laois, Offaly and Kildare. We can also see that it might be working in Dublin but it is too early to know for sure. The R-nought number, however, seems to be down to approximately 1. It will be the best part of ten days before we know whether it is working in the rest of the country but it is something on which we are acting.

Capacity is an issue in our health service. It is very often an issue. Going into this crisis, we had well above the European average number of nurses and about the average number of doctors at 3.3 per 100,000. We were a bit below average as regards hospital beds when compared

with other countries but had more than countries such as Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada and New Zealand. I could go on. Since then we have added 800 acute and subacute beds to the system, approximately 150 of which are currently being used by patients who have Covid. We have also increased the number of ICU beds, which was 225, by approximately 60. Approximately 25 or 26 are being used today. We have increased capacity and will increase it further.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Tánaiste said this should not be a matter of NPHET versus the Government and I agree. Everybody needs to get on the same page. It was not me, however, who went on the national broadcaster to take the legs from under our Chief Medical Officer. It was not me who engaged in that type of dangerous behaviour. I put it to the Tánaiste that, if it had been me, he would be the first to stand up and say that it was reckless, that it undermined public confidence and so on. The question is one of capacity. The real reason the Tánaiste made his statement is because NPHET called that out. The reason we are even contemplating these stringent restrictions is the lack of capacity in our health system. The Tánaiste has been Minister for Health and Taoiseach and he has been in government for the past nine years. He has left the State extremely vulnerable with regard to our number of ICU beds. That is the question I have asked, not who knew what, when and where. It is a question of what the Government is going to do as regards ICU beds because its winter plan will fail. It is not enough. The Government is depending on surge capacity and this means closing down other elective care, which means delays in diagnosis and a lack of other crucial treatments. Where is the Government's plan? What is it going to do to address this real issue of capacity, which has not only been raised by those of us in Sinn Féin? The Tánaiste should talk to people on the front line, the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, and the managers in our hospitals. They are all singing the same tune. We are seriously stressed in terms of capacity in this State and the winter is going to be very difficult as a result.

**The Tánaiste:** On the issue of ICU capacity, as I outlined earlier, we went from 225 beds at the start of the year to close to 300 beds now. The number of patients in ICU with Covid-19 is around 25. We have the ability to go to 360 beds with surge capacity, and there is also the option of using the private hospitals. That option was available to us in the spring and it can be available again. Those are the facts of the situation.

I know what Deputy Doherty is trying to do, namely, play the blame game. He is trying to set it up so that if the country has to go back into severe lockdown, he can blame the Government and say it is all down to hospital capacity.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** What was the Tánaiste doing on Monday night?

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** It is all in NPHET's letter. Read the letter.

**The Tánaiste:** Let us look at other countries. Two good examples are the Netherlands and Spain. Both those countries have a much higher incidence of the coronavirus than Ireland and fewer hospital beds per head than Ireland and neither is at this stage considering going back into lockdown. That is the position.

In relation to the Chief Medical Officer, I did not say a bad word about him.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Tánaiste:** He is somebody I respect immensely and someone I worked with very close-

ly on difficult issues, such as Portlaoise and CervicalCheck, when the Opposition was taking lumps out of him, by the way.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste:** I spoke to the CMO on Tuesday night, which was the first time I had a chance to speak to him in ages. I did not want to bother him while he was off because his wife is sick. We had a good personal conversation. We cleared the air and neither of us has any issue with the other. We spent most of that conversation talking about how we are going to beat this virus, and that is what we should be talking about today.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** That is what the Tánaiste should have been talking about on RTÉ on Monday.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** Sinn Féin is still sitting on the fence. It still has not come out-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputies. I call Deputy Catherine Murphy, without interruption.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I watched the Tánaiste's interview on the "Claire Byrne Live" show on Monday night. The view I formed, and I think many people formed the same view, was that the Tánaiste got his information from a media leak. We know that was not the case, that there was an unscheduled meeting of NPHET on Sunday, and that the Minister for Health also had telephone calls before and after that meeting. Telephone conversations are two way. We would expect the Minister for Health to have asked questions to see what exactly that meeting was about and what measures NPHET was considering. Was the Tánaiste fully aware of that conversation and will he outline that for us?

In hindsight, given the escalating numbers, does the Tánaiste regret the interview with Claire Byrne? Does he accept that it has been a distraction in the fight against the virus? Does he accept that the primary focus this week has been about mending fences? Indeed, the Tánaiste has just said that he had a telephone conversation to clear the air. We really should be focusing on putting our collective efforts into fighting this virus. A collective approach is needed from the Government, NPHET, the political system and from the public. The public can only do so much, however. The State must also play its part and play it comprehensively. We must reduce the incidence of the virus and take the pressure off the hospitals, and those matters are already being talked about.

In March, the Tánaiste told us that there was a comprehensive strategy involving restrictions, social distancing, testing, contact tracing and isolation where there was a positive test result. That was followed in May when he announced the HSE's strategy on testing and contact tracing. There were going to be key performance indicators for testing and contact tracing. In recent days, a leading health specialist has warned that regional departments in the public health system can no longer cope and that Covid-19 outbreaks are going to be missed. Dr. Anne Dee, a consultant in public health medicine, is reported as saying that eight regional departments are now "throwing in the towel" and giving up on "proper" contact tracing. She spoke about the urgency of getting staff and was fearful that it will be the new year before those staff are in place. She added that "The regional health system is as close to collapse as it has been at any time before."

We trusted the Government to ensure that these systems were put in place and that they were

resourced and functioning. The idea that contact tracing is nearing collapse should be a major source of concern. We cannot contain the virus if we do not know where it is and we do not ensure that people are properly traced. We need a frank discussion on the shortcomings and how they are going to be addressed.

Does the Tánaiste believe that, to clear the air, the Minister for Health should make a full statement in the Dáil so that people can ask questions? I ask because we must get rid of this distraction. Were those with responsibility for regional public health systems contacted and asked what is required? What systems are being put in place to ensure the contact tracing system works?

**The Tánaiste:** To answer the Deputy's first question, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, will make a statement today.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Will it be in the Dáil?

**The Tánaiste:** His office has informed me that he will do that today. I cannot answer the Deputy's second question regarding whether public health departments have been contacted, but I am sure they have been. We all appreciate the amazing work the public health departments are doing in contact tracing. They have had the assistance of people who would never have known what contact tracing was until recent months but who were trained to do exactly that, including members of the Defence Forces. It is important that they are properly resourced.

As the number of cases increases and the number of contacts people have also increases, contact tracing becomes all the more difficult. That is why we are asking people to minimise the number of social contacts they have, because that will make the job easier for contact tracers. If most of us have two, three or four social contacts, that makes the job of a contact tracer much easier than if we have 20, 30 or 40 social contacts. That is part of the rationale behind encouraging people to avoid gatherings and limiting the size of gatherings that people can have.

In relation to Monday night, I did not say I heard it from a media leak. I never said that. If that is the impression the Deputy got, that is the impression she got, but it is not something that I have ever claimed. I set out the timeline earlier in response to Deputy Doherty. It is how many of the public heard, though, and that caused fear, anxiety and panic for hundreds of thousands of people who thought they might be out of work the next day and for tens of thousands of businesses that thought they might have to close for the last time. It should not have happened in that way and that is not the way things were handled in the past. I totally agree with the Deputy, however, that the events of Sunday and Monday, all of them, are a distraction from what we now need to do, which is to fight the coronavirus together. The Government, the Opposition, the HSE, NPHET, the Department of Health and everybody must work together against this common enemy. That is what I want to do.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** In that case, the Tánaiste accepts that Monday was a distraction. It was a two-way conversation-----

**The Tánaiste:** I think the Deputy's line of questioning is a distraction as well.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** What we do not want a statement to be made and then further questions to be asked. Let us put this issue to bed. I presume the Minister for Health will be coming into the Dáil to make that statement.



The public can only do so much. We hear senior people in the public health system saying that a system that is vital to dealing with this virus is close to collapse. What is being done about that? Can the Tánaiste give an assurance that the resources required will be put in place? If we do not shut down this virus, we will shut down the economy. The virus and the economy cannot coexist. That seems to be self-evident. The Tánaiste himself made great play of this in March, and rightly so, when he said tracing was to be a central part of the strategy. It must be meaningful, however. It is not just down to the public. I encourage people to reduce the number of their social contacts, but the State has a responsibility in this area as well.

**The Tánaiste:** The way we will beat this virus is through collective action led by the Government and individual actions which people take in their everyday lives. We all appreciate that individual actions are required, with all of us following those public health guidelines, and Government action to ensure we put the infrastructure in place. Part of that infrastructure involves testing, and we are now testing 100,000 people per week. There are 12,000, 13,000 or 14,000 tests every day. This is polymerase chain reaction, PCR, testing which is the gold standard in testing. Many other countries are not using PCR and are using less specific and less sensitive types of testing, such as antigen testing. There is a role for that type of testing, but we are using PCR testing at the moment. We are testing more people per head than many other countries that are often cited as models for dealing with the coronavirus, such as New Zealand and Germany. We are well up there in terms of testing.

On tracing, I did see that report, although I do not know exactly where it came from. I think it was anonymous but I may be wrong. I cannot speak for the HSE on the details of what resources are being provided for tracing but I totally agree with the Deputy that tracing is a crucial part of our response to the coronavirus. Those departments need to be resourced and they have been in the past few months. People from the Defence Forces, teachers and civil servants were trained up. Huge numbers of people were brought in to supplement the standing public health teams and that needs to be scaled up again, if it has not been done already.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The last few questions have been about Covid but I wish to discuss the situation of school secretaries, who did enormous work over the past six months to ensure the reopening of our national and secondary schools, which is one of the best achievements during Covid so far. Over 1,000 school secretaries are not being treated equally in their pay and conditions of employment. Will the Government enter into meaningful discussions in the Labour Court, as agreed by the former Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Joe McHugh, in the House last October? That was 12 months ago. Over 1,000 school secretaries are being treated unequally as they are not getting paid other than through an annualised grant. They are working side by side with secretaries in other schools in their towns and villages who are getting their full pay and being treated as public servants with holiday pay and entitlements. We have relied on school secretaries to make sure that schools and their management have some resources in place. Many of these school secretaries worked over the summer months without pay to make sure the schools reopened. I understand that discussions have taken place but they have not been meaningful. Will the Government ensure fair treatment and parity of esteem for those school secretaries? They are not very happy that their issue has been kicked down the road and are contemplating industrial action. It would be an indictment of all of us if school secretaries had to go out on strike after all they have done. We have talked about front-line workers' bravery. I believe school secretaries are front-line workers as well.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Canney for raising this issue. I know it is close to his heart and I remember us speaking about it months ago when we were in government together. The

Government really values the essential work done by school secretaries and caretakers. Often, the school secretary is the first person one meets on the way into a school and the caretaker is the last person to leave in the evening. Schools would not operate without them and the role they play in our education system is as important as that of schoolteachers, SNAs and school principals. For that reason, it is the Government's objective to regularise their employment, terms and conditions, and pension rights. That can only be done going forward. It cannot be done retrospectively, for reasons that I will explain. Of course, it has to be done by agreement and engagement and I sincerely hope that engagement will take place.

I am advised that officials from the Departments of Education and Skills and Public Expenditure and Reform and school management bodies met with the trade union Fórsa on 1 October in the Workplace Relations Commission. An offer of a modest multiannual pay increase was made to Fórsa at that meeting but it was not acceptable to the union. The Department of Education and Skills, in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, is considering the union's request to refer the matter to the Labour Court for determination. A number of technical issues exist as neither the Departments nor the management bodies are the employers of the staff in question. In these circumstances, Fórsa's statement that it is considering strike action is regrettable, and as we know, any such action would have a day-to-day impact on the operation of schools at this critical time and would disrupt tuition for students who have only recently returned to school after a six-month gap.

The Government is keenly aware of the role played by these vital staff and significant improvements to the pay of secretaries and caretakers have been made since 2015, under a pay arbitration scheme. This provided for a pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 for staff, with a minimum rate of €13 per hour phased in over that period. The average hourly rate for a school secretary is now €15.49, which is in line with the hourly rate for a grade 3 clerical officer, taking into account that a clerical officer works through the summer.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** There are a number of issues here. The Tánaiste talked about engagement and it is important that engagement takes place. It has been a year since the then Minister for Education and Skills agreed to enter into engagement with school secretaries. The offer made by the Department was for a pay rise, but what the school secretaries want is equality in their pay, terms and conditions. This issue has not been addressed by officials from either the Department of Education and Skills or the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the discussions. If we are going to bring into force what we say about holding school secretaries in high esteem, we need to engage in the mechanisms that are in place. I again urge that this issue be taken up as a matter of urgency. School secretaries are not people who want to go on strike. They are not threatening it if they do not get somewhere but there is a short window of opportunity for the Departments to engage meaningfully to find a resolution to this matter once and for all.

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy is correct that a pay rise has been offered, but this is not just about pay. It is about other issues as well and school secretaries and caretakers understandably want their employment terms and conditions to be regularised. They want to be public sector employees, like teachers and other secretaries in the public service, working in local authorities or Civil Service departments. However, we need to work out what equality means. Secretaries and clerical officers working in Departments and local authorities work year-round and only have a few weeks of annual leave. Many of those issues have to be worked out because equality must be defined in that context. As is always the case with industrial relations matters such as this one, anything we do would have to be prospective and not retrospective. If changes were

retrospective, they would kick off claims from up to 100,000 other people who are not directly employed by the State but by bodies that are grant-aided by the State. The Deputy will be familiar with a similar issue that arises with supervisors on community employment schemes. The resolution can only be a prospective one but we do want to resolve this.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Tánaiste or Taoiseach, it makes no difference because Deputy Varadkar is both now.

**The Tánaiste:** I am very definitely Tánaiste. I will show the Deputy my payslip.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Last Monday, my colleagues and I had a very important meeting with the excellent CEO of Kerry County Council, Ms Moira Murrell, and other directors of services with the council, including Michael Scannell, Charlie O'Sullivan, head of finance Angela McAllen, and others. One of the items on the agenda was the deficit in local authority funding. I am fearful that there will be cuts in basic day-to-day services, such as taking care of housing stock, work on essential issues like roads and keeping services like libraries and public toilets open. Our county will not be able to progress with new projects and initiatives. Rather, it will struggle to provide essential services like those I have outlined already. All our local authority has got so far is six months of a subvention on rates but it will now have to go after businesses looking for the other six months' worth of rates. How in heaven's name can we go after cinemas, for example, which barely opened to very small numbers, and ask them to pay rates? Our excellent county councillors on our local authority had to vote blindly on a property tax last week, not knowing what money they will be getting from central government.

Now we are faced with a new issue, namely, the climate Bill. New responsibility will be put on local authorities, which will be required to produce annual climate action plans, dealing with both the mitigation and adaptation sides of climate issues. Frans Timmermans, the European Commissioner and Vice-President in charge of overseeing the European green deal, says we must plough ahead with this agenda at all costs. What about the implications of imposing billions of euro of extra taxes on a public that is in dire straits and hurting already? I will get a bit personal about this, not because she is my daughter as there are many other people's daughters. Rosie Healy-Rae and Micheál O'Shea, a very nice, young, respectable local man were getting married this Saturday. It has been cancelled. The implications and the economic bang of that for the hotel, the hairdressers, the car hire company and the people who provide the flowers is enormous. That is only an example; there are other people. 10-10-20 was going to be their special day, like a bag of fertiliser.

While all this is going on, the Tánaiste and the Cabinet are signing up to €9.5 billion of additional carbon taxes on a public who, like I say, are really hurting. It will be €1 billion a year of additional taxes. I am not a climate change denier. I want to protect all species on this planet, including the human species. It is suggested that households may have to pay excise duty on their electricity to compensate for the drop in revenue to the State from the people switching from petrol and diesel to electric vehicles. This is according to a report from the Department of Finance's tax strategy group. People will be penalised for going green.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Healy-Rae for raising this important question. I know that the issue of local authority deficits is a matter of concern around the country. It is coming up from Deputies from all constituencies. I understand from Deputy Griffin that the financial gap for Kerry County Council is estimated at about €5 million or €6 million for 2020, potentially rising to €13 million for 2021. That would be a grave situation indeed. The Government un-

derstands that local authority income is down for many different reasons, ranging from parking charges not coming in to other charges and income streams being depleted. It is a matter that is being worked on by my colleagues, the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, and the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath. As the Deputy knows, we waived commercial rates for quarters two and three for most businesses. There was a commercial rates holiday for most businesses for six months. Usually, even in a good year, a local authority might only collect 87% or 88% of that money. We gave them the full 100% anyway, so they got more than they would have from commercial rates in a normal year. We are examining what we are going to do about quarter four rates. An announcement about that will be made in the budget next week. We are aware that additional funding will be required for local authorities to plug deficits that are arising. It is very much in the mix for the budget.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank the Tánaiste. Ministers are being told that they will be audited with regard to carbon emission-reducing measures. What will that mean for our farming community and fishermen who are already in dire straits? I have discussed this with Irish Farmers' Association leadership over the last 24 hours and I am again coming back to the fact that the Cabinet is saying that our State will have to come up with €1 billion of additional taxes every year for the next ten years. What are the implications for our tourism industry, including, for example, our airline industry? This is outside of Covid. Will we have to reduce the number of people allowed to come into the country? We are continuously trying to attract people here. Will we say that planes will not be able to fly? Will we have to say to people that they will not be able to burn turf or timber in their fires? We always said the one thing that people had to do was to keep the home fires burning. Are the Tánaiste and the Cabinet, and present and future Governments, tying people's hands behind their backs and saying that they cannot do that? I am not denying that we have issues to deal with with regard to our climate but we have to protect the present and future public from being overburdened with tax. I appreciate the sincerity of people like Deputy Eamon Ryan but we cannot go blindly into this, signing a blank cheque and putting future generations of people at enormous expense for something that we cannot even discuss.

**The Tánaiste:** I assure the Deputy that the Government will certainly not tell people in rural Ireland that they cannot burn their own turf or timber in their own fire. That will not happen. That would be totally disproportionate and unnecessary, given the fact that air quality is very high in rural Ireland. It is a different issue in towns and cities where we have a problem with air quality and that is impacting on people's health, especially those who have chronic conditions such as asthma and COPD, and therefore action needs to be taken.

Taking climate action is one of the reasons why this Government was formed. It is why Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party came together, to accelerate Ireland's response to climate change and to up our game when it comes to climate action, to honour the commitment to go from being a laggard to a leader as soon as we can. The Government has made good progress in that regard. The July stimulus included a package of investment in everything from bog rewetting and bog restoration to cycling and pedestrian facilities, which will have an impact on the climate in a positive way. Just yesterday, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, published landmark legislation, a climate action Bill, and I congratulate him on that. It builds on the good work of Deputy Alan Kelly in the Fine Gael-Labour Government with the first climate law. Now there is a much stronger climate law brought in by Deputy Eamon Ryan.

The carbon tax will go up in the budget. That is programmed into it. Bear in mind that most of the cost of the carbon tax will fall on business and the rest on households. It will all be

ring-fenced for things like dealing with fuel poverty and investment, mainly in rural Ireland, in things such as retrofitting. It will be a ring-fenced increase with the money being ploughed into poverty reduction and climate action measures.

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

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Yesterday we raised the long-running concern that we have about section 39 workers and the need for the Government to intervene and ensure that thousands of workers secure pay justice. In response, the Taoiseach said that the Ministers for Public Expenditure and Reform and Finance, and wider Government, would continue to examine the situation. I understand that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has since written to ICTU, declining an invitation to intervene in the dispute. The Tánaiste knows that these are the very same workers who made sure that essential services were maintained throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. I know that a number of unions involved now plan to ballot their members for industrial action. Fórsa's Catherine Keogh said yesterday that union members feel that the Department of Health, the HSE and Government have effectively turned their backs on them. She continued "They deserve a swift and decisive response that shows their work is valued". SIPTU is calling on the Government to back up its applause for essential front-line workers and to provide the necessary funding to make sure that all section 39 workers get the pay justice they deserve. Will the Tánaiste convert his applause into action for these workers?

**The Tánaiste:** As the Deputy knows, section 39 workers are a diverse group. They are not public servants and they are not Government employees but the work that they do is extraordinarily valuable. Some are employees of companies, some are employees of NGOs and some are employees of charities. These companies, NGOs and charities receive grant funding from the Government to fund partially or fully their operations but they are not employees of Government and they are not public servants, which is what makes this a complicated issue to deal with. Funding for section 39 bodies has been increased and will be increased again.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Last Friday evening, I spent over an hour with the Swords Youth Service, with a group of teenage boys, young men, who are known as the Underground Gang. They fear, like with many youth services around the country, for the viability of their service and the future of their funding. In line with the call from the National Youth Council of Ireland, what commitments can the Tánaiste give that there will be funding not only for 2021 but in the years ahead, so this vital service which has helped many young people through the ongoing Covid crisis knows that there is a future for the service?

**The Tánaiste:** I am afraid I do not have information to hand on that matter but I appreciate that it is important and a matter of concern to constituents. I will let the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, know that Deputy Smith raised it and ask him to reply directly.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I raise a matter of concern in our schools. There are families with children in school but the parents have a severe underlying health condition. They feel they are being failed as there is no remote learning option for students in such cases. For example, in the case of a family I am dealing with, the mother, who has a severe form of blood cancer, has two teenage children of schoolgoing age who cannot access remote learning options. How can the State step in to support these people and provide remote learning options and genuine help? There is a failing in this regard and it is leading to a financial burden and increasing anxiety in an enormously difficult time.



**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call the Taoiseach. Apologies, I call the Tánaiste.

**The Tánaiste:** The Ceann Comhairle is at it too. It is October now.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is catching.

**The Tánaiste:** I thought that would end around September but it is still happening.

I thank Deputy Gannon for raising the matter, which I understand is a difficulty. The solution is probably some form of blended learning. If pupils cannot be in the classroom because they are sick, are isolating or restricting movements or they live in a household with a vulnerable person, the ideal scenario would be some sort of mechanism by which they could use Zoom to participate in the class and at least get some education. It is a good suggestion and I will certainly discuss it with the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Foley, to see if we can make some progress.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** On “Claire Byrne Live”, in justifying the Government’s decision to dismiss the public health advice and trash the rationale of the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, in calling for further restrictions, the Tánaiste cited his concern for workers and people who either have lost their jobs or might lose their jobs as a result of restrictions.

Aside from the irony that the Government is cutting the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, lifting the eviction ban and facilitating the removal of the mortgage repayments moratorium, a group of workers, who have felt an impact, is outside the Leinster House gates now. I refer to the 22,000 taxi drivers and their families for whom, despite promises from numerous Ministers, the Taoiseach and so on that they would meet taxi drivers again and listen to their requests for assistance, nothing has been forthcoming. Their PUP is being cut, although there is no work out there for them and the grants they need to cover costs and sustain themselves have not been provided. Will the Tánaiste listen to and act on the requests of the taxi drivers, who are currently in a dire state?

**The Tánaiste:** I really feel for taxi drivers, who have incurred an enormous hit to their incomes. They are essential people and we want them to be there when we get through this pandemic. We want the industry and the individuals working in it to survive. I am not aware of the particular details as to what engagement has taken place between the Government and the group but if I can be of any assistance in meeting them, I am happy to do that and hear out their suggestions. I cannot promise to deliver all of them but I would be happy to receive a delegation from taxi drivers and to see what are their suggestions. If we can do something within all the usual reasonable parameters, we will do that.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Two years ago, news broke that Ms Emma Mhic Mhathúna died after a battle with cancer. Many people remember where they were on that day and when they heard that heartbreaking news. On the second anniversary of her death, newspapers reported that another woman was dragged through the legal system before her case was settled in the High Court. This is despite the Tánaiste stating that no other terminally ill woman would be dragged through the courts.

Ms Patricia Carrick is a mother of four who is 51 years old. She was too ill to attend court this week and I offer my sincere solidarity, praise and prayers to the Carrick family. The timeline is important. News of the CervicalCheck scandal had broken and Emma Mhic Mhathúna

had passed away four months before Patricia took a smear test from which abnormalities were missed. The fact that there still seemed to be mistakes in assessing smear tests last year is shocking. Will the Tánaiste clarify what is happening?

**The Tánaiste:** I am afraid I cannot but I certainly will ask the Minister for Health if he can answer any questions the Deputy has in this regard. Nobody wants to see women or any patients having to go through the courts to receive compensation where negligence has occurred but we have a real difficulty as sometimes the facts are disputed. Where facts are disputed, there must be some mechanism by which both sides can be heard, experts can be interviewed and a decision can be made. At present, that happens in the courts but as the Deputy knows, work is very advanced now on an alternative process, which is to be tribunal-based.

I am thankful that the vast majority of cases are settled by mediation or negotiation and do not require a full court hearing. Some cases nonetheless require such hearings. It is sad that with any test, whether it is a smear test, another lab test or a coronavirus test, there will be false negatives and false positives. Most of these are not a result of negligence but some are. It is a difficult truth.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** My concern relates to the flu vaccine, which was highlighted on the "Claire Byrne Live" programme on Monday night. One would think this was a way of promoting the flu vaccine but over the past week, my office has been inundated with questions about the flu vaccine and specifically quotas for doctors.

Doctors are now only receiving their first quota of vaccine but they are inundated with requests from people who are very nervous about not getting the flu vaccine. I know there is a flu epidemic on top of a pandemic. For example, a practice nurse has said she went live with a children's clinic on Monday evening and the vaccines sold out within a couple of hours. There have been several queries about how the portal is not open for the ordering of extra vaccine. Could this be addressed as a matter of urgency?

**The Tánaiste:** As a result of the pandemic this year, there will be a big increase in the number of people who will want a vaccination against flu. As the Deputy knows, either for the first time or the first time in a very long time, children between ages two and 12 will get a vaccination against the flu and there will be a really good uptake this year. I found it quite alarming that in previous years, less than 50% of healthcare workers, for example, got vaccinated. I am confident that the lessons from the pandemic will result in that figure going way up to 70%, 80% or 90%.

I have heard there are some supply issues but I am not sure of the current state of play. I am confident there will be enough vaccinations to ensure people can be vaccinated before flu season begins.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Under the aviation section of the programme for Government, there is a clear commitment to deliver the capital programmes required to support services and ensure safety at State and regional airports. I am speaking specifically in respect of Cork Airport, with which the Tánaiste is familiar. The chief executive officer of Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, was in Leinster House yesterday and he stated that Cork has received no direct funding. I am merely asking now if Cork Airport will be able to access regional airport operating expenditure and capital funding so as to ensure it can survive the storm. This is so that when people start flying again, it will have a fighting chance.

Cork Airport went from 2.7 million passengers in 2019 to 650,000 passengers this year. If we are speaking about regionally balanced economic policies, we must ensure Cork has a fighting chance in order that when the airlines that have left Cork decide to come back, they will be able to do it through a sustainable operation.

**The Tánaiste:** It is really important that the aviation industry must survive this pandemic. I mean our airports, airlines and the related sectors, including aircraft maintenance and repair organisations. Ten or 12 years ago, during the previous recession, the construction industry collapsed and this was allowed because it was, in part, blamed for the crisis. We paid a very heavy price for that because two, three or four years later, when we needed a construction sector to build houses and infrastructure, it was not there. I am determined that will not happen again and that sectors like hospitality and aviation should survive this pandemic. We are going to need them when the pandemic is over, and it will end.

It is a matter that the Government is considering. EU state aid rules allow airports with fewer than 3 million passengers per year to receive state aid. This was not done, traditionally, for Cork, as the profits from Dublin were used to cross-subsidise Cork. No profits have been made at Dublin Airport this year, and this will change things. That is the current Government thinking.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Is that a “Yes”? Will we get funding in Cork?

**The Tánaiste:** It is to be decided by the Minister for Transport.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I am taking that as a “Yes”.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Colleges have now moved online again under instruction from the Government. Students and hard-pressed parents have forked out thousands of euro for accommodation that will go unused for a second time this year, in all likelihood until Christmas. In many cases no refunds are being issued. This is a national scandal. These parents are so upset. They are hard-pressed in trying to pay bills, having paid for accommodation that in many cases they are not using. Surely the Tánaiste and the Government should be able to call this situation to order. Right is right - someone who buys a loaf of bread gets a loaf of bread. If people pay for accommodation, they use it. If they do not use it, they should not have to pay for it. In my common-sense view, that is fair and honest dealing.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I hear what he is saying. Students should not have to pay for accommodation they cannot use, or in some cases have been told not to use. The Deputy will realise that in some cases, such accommodation is owned by institutes of technology and universities, while in other cases it is not and there is, therefore, a different relationship between the student and the accommodation provider. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Harris, about this to see if we can arrive at a solution.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** The programme for Government pledges to support local drug and alcohol task forces to help them identify needs in the community. I was a member of a drugs task force in the very early days and for several periods since then, until quite recently. I remember the exciting days when the community felt its voice was being heard. That has sadly been lost in the past ten years. Can the Tánaiste commit to supporting strong community representation on drug and alcohol task forces and to making statutory engagements obligatory for Departments and agencies? More importantly, can he commit to immediately investing in a new community development initiative to support community participation? The core issue is

that we need community representatives who are supported on drug and alcohol task forces in order they can make a real commitment and bring real energy back to the task forces.

**The Tánaiste:** Where drug and alcohol task forces work, community representation and involvement makes all the difference. That factor means a task force is not composed of people coming from outside the area and applying a top-down approach. The Deputy is spot on in that regard. I am not across this area in detail anymore but I will raise the Deputy's query with the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. Anything to do with funding is a budgetary matter.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** We are facing into the season of long winter nights. With the restrictions that will be in place because of the virus, there will be no card games or bingo or plays in local halls. People's mental health and well-being will come under huge pressure. I ask the Tánaiste to consider extending summer time this year. This would theoretically bring the spring evenings sooner. We would have an extra hour of light in the evenings, which I think would help people's mental well-being. Older people would be able to stay outside in their gardens and on their lawns that bit longer.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I had not expected that question. This issue is debated from time to time. As the Deputy knows, the Minister with responsibility for time is the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy McEntee. I will let her know the Deputy has made this suggestion. There are arguments on both sides of this, and believe it or not there is a European directive on it. We would have to bear in mind what would happen in Northern Ireland. I would not like us to be in a different time zone to the Six Counties of Northern Ireland. That would be odd. If we were to do something it would be important to co-ordinate it on a North-South basis.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** In 2013 the mobility grant scheme was suspended. I know that those who were getting it still get it, but that was a long time ago. It was said at the time that an alternative scheme was being devised. The upshot of a recent court case is that we are no longer carrying out examinations for the primary medical certificate. Will the people affected by this have to wait seven years for the issue to be addressed? We talk about care for the disabled, but do we act accordingly? Will provisions to rectify both of these issues be included in two items of legislation? I refer to including the issue of primary medical certificates in the finance Bill. Since 2013, we have been told that a replacement for the mobility scheme is being devised. Will a transport support scheme be included in the Bill to amend the Health Act 1947?

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I raised this issue with the Minister for Finance earlier this week. Any person with mobility issues who is not on the public transport network is now effectively marooned in this country. That particularly applies across rural Ireland. The mobility allowance, the motorised transport grant and the primary medical certificate have now been suspended. No financial support is available. This needs to be dealt with in an expeditious manner and legislation must be brought forward as a matter of urgency.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputies. I have to confess that I was not aware an issue around the primary medical certificate had arisen in the courts. That is a matter of real concern. I will check that out for myself and will speak to the Minister for Finance about it. As Deputy Ó Cuív has rightly said, that mobility grant scheme has been closed to new entrants for seven or eight years, a very long time. In the last Government, the Minister of State with responsibility for disability issues, Finian McGrath, did a huge amount of work to develop a new scheme. However it was very difficult to come up with terms and rules on where to draw the line and who would and would not get it. Cost was also an issue. However, that is true of every scheme,

including health and social welfare schemes. That is something we need to sort out. It now falls to the new Minister of State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Rabbitte, to take up that work and lead it forward. I am sure she will.

**Deputy John Brady:** Yesterday the Garda rolled out an operation which saw the establishment of 132 static checkpoints across the State to try to stop non-essential travel between counties. While I fully support An Garda Síochána and appreciate the job it must do, the way in which it was rolled out caused complete chaos throughout the State, including in my own county of Wicklow. I have received numerous texts and phone calls from people caught in traffic jams for four hours and more. One lady coming from Crumlin hospital with her son was caught in serious traffic on the M50 and M11 for four hours. One front-line worker, a nurse, texted me to say that she had been stuck on the M11 for three and a half hours. These are essential workers who have to go to work on a daily basis. They do not have the option of working from home. While I fully support the endeavours of the Garda, this operation has caused major problems throughout the State and compounded the difficulties experienced by many businesses.

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

**Deputy John Brady:** I know the Garda has made changes to several traffic layouts such as the N7 and the M2.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Brady is taking his colleagues' time.

**Deputy John Brady:** Will the Tánaiste ask the Garda Commissioner to examine these operations and their impact on genuine people right across the State?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I very much regret any inconvenience caused to people from Wicklow, Meath or Kildare who are essential workers, perhaps in hospitals, in Dublin. As the Deputy is aware, Garda operations are a matter for the Garda Commissioner. We do not get too involved and that is probably for the best. However, I certainly will make sure this is part of the discussion in consultations between the Government and the Garda Commissioner.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The programme for Government states that the Government is very serious about making a difference in the lives of people with disabilities. I am not sure if the Tánaiste is aware but there have been serious issues in Cork in respect of disabled parking. *1 o'clock* Cork city has rolled out an initiative to pedestrianise some streets to get more people to dine outdoors, visit restaurants and utilise the city centre. This is a very good initiative and I welcome it. However, it has caused serious issues with disabled parking spaces. Many have been moved. There are 100 disabled parking spaces in Cork, some in areas that are not suitable. People cannot access them.

When people get out of their car, they are on a roadway or cannot get onto a footpath. What will the Government do to oversee the approach being taken by local authorities to disabled parking and accessibility for people with disabilities? We wish to support disabled people and we need the Government to address this issue.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Are councillors not supposed to oversee local authorities, rather than the Tánaiste doing so?

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I am trying to ensure adequate and proper disabled parking spaces are provided. I am asking the Government to step in if that is not being done locally.



**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has made his point.

**The Tánaiste:** One of the silver linings to the very dark cloud which is this pandemic is that it is causing us to reimagine our cities and city centres and, to a certain extent, to reclaim the streets for cycling, pedestrians and things such as outdoor dining, which the Deputy mentioned, notwithstanding the often inclement weather. In general, the Government leaves these matters to local authorities. It is appropriate for it to do so. The people who know Cork best are those on Cork City Council. The same principle applies in Dublin and other parts of the country. In order to ensure that disabled people are not shut out of these new cities, because that would be a terrible thing, the Department of Transport could work on some form of guidelines. I will ensure the Deputy's comments are passed on to that Department.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Neither my party nor I has any desire to use the issue of ICU capacity to blame Fine Gael or anybody else for the spread of the virus. To do so would be disingenuous. However, we are very concerned about capacity in hospitals. I have spoken to many hospital managers in recent days. In my region, the south east, University Hospital Waterford had one spare ICU bed yesterday. The hospital manager told me there has been a massive increase in hospital admissions, with 176 admissions yesterday. There was a significant increase in trauma cases and because there was no ICU capacity in hospitals in Wexford or Tipperary there was significant demand for transfers into University Hospital Waterford. Hospital managers have told me that without additional capacity we are facing a very real problem and that what has been promised in terms of additional ICU and acute beds simply will not be enough. Will the Tánaiste tell them that if more beds than those committed to in the winter plan are needed, as I believe they are, the Government will make those resources available as soon as possible?

**The Tánaiste:** The short answer to the Deputy's question is "Yes". Covid pandemic or no Covid pandemic, we should increase our critical care bed capacity to in the region of 400 or 500 beds. We should be doing that anyway. We have made progress in recent years, but it has not been enough. Efforts in that regard need to continue. As the Deputy appreciates, it is not as simple as just providing a bed. An ICU bed is quite a thing and must be very heavily staffed. It is often the case that staff are not available. That is not just the case in Ireland; it is a problem in many places around the world. I was glad to hear the Deputy's initial remarks. We will monitor what he and other Sinn Féin spokespeople have to say. His comments were not made in the tone I have heard from some other Deputies.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** Today is National Traveller Mental Health Day. Nearly 80% of Travellers who took part in a survey stated that they or a member of their family had suffered from depression, compared with just 8% of the general population. The survey, carried out by the Clondalkin Traveller primary healthcare project, involved Travellers living in the Clondalkin, Lucan, Newcastle and Palmerstown areas. Suicide and self-harm are also major factors, with 74% of respondents stating that they or a family member had suffered from self-harm. On page 54 of the programme for Government, there is a commitment to publishing a Traveller and Roma mental health action plan. Has that work commenced? When will the action plan be published?

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** I was contacted by a parent of an 18-year-old young man who had an acute mental illness. He suffered from it for approximately a year. She told me he had regular appointments when he was under the adolescent services and that the support he got was very good, but since he turned 18 in February he has only had two appointments. He was

supposed to have an appointment on 30 September but it was cancelled at short notice. He was promised there would be a follow-up phone call but it never came. When the family rang the clinic they were put through to another doctor who told them they had reached the wrong person and then hung up. He eventually got a prescription. Can face-to-face appointments for people with mental health issues be rolled out again? There have been three suicides in my locality in the past month. Two 21-year-olds and a 16-year-old took their own lives. There have also been several attempted suicides by young people. Mental health supports are vital.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** Last week, the mental health charity HOPE(D), which is based in Newbridge, found out that it is going to lose its premises. The HSE refers clients to the service but it receives no funding. Imagine the HSE sending a person to a service that receives no funding. When will that organisation get a permanent home? What can be done about this situation? When will a 24-7 mental health service be provided?

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I wish to raise the issue of the mental health of LGBTI young people in particular, who have had a very difficult time in recent months. They have not had a comfortable environment or been accepted. There has been a significant increase in referrals to BeLonGTo and other organisations. I raise this issue very strongly on behalf of those young people.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputies for raising the important issues they outlined relating to mental health, including individual cases, local services, LGBT young people and the Traveller and Roma communities. The commitment to develop and implement that strategy stands. I will ask the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Butler, to provide specific replies to the Deputies.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** As the Tánaiste is aware, on page 12 of the programme for Government there is a commitment that new measures of well-being will be used to drive Government policy-making and to set budget priorities. As we plan for a world post Covid or through Covid and that is affected by climate change, that commitment is more important than ever. Those challenges are exposing the fragility of the approaches we have taken, as well as the capacity for solidarity if we get this right. When will we see movement on that initiative? What gets measured is what gets done. Will Ministers who will be producing strategy statements within 100 days set targets in respect of those wider dimensions that we need to factor into policy-making?

**The Tánaiste:** There is an old adage that one cannot improve what one does not measure. We are very good at measuring many things in Ireland, whether it is GDP, GNI\*, unemployment numbers or waiting list numbers, etc. What we do not really have is an index for the well-being of society. There is a specific programme for Government commitment to do exactly that. I am not sure of its status, but it is something on which we wish to make progress. Some other countries have done it. The Government welcomes input from the Deputy and the various parties as to what that new index should look like.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes Questions on Promised Legislation. We succeeded in getting in 20 Deputies today, which is not too bad. Well done to all.

## **Mental Health Parity of Esteem Bill 2020: First Stage**

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to place mental health on parity with physical health; to improve provision of mental health services; to increase the quality of care for those in mental health services; and to provide for related matters.

For too long, mental health has been the Cinderella of the health services. Years of neglect, under-investment and lack of political will have led to systemic failures in the mental health system. Experts described the mental health services to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response as being out of date and not fit for purpose. A mental health parity of esteem with physical health approach will provide a holistic, whole-person response to all those who are in need of care and support, with their physical and mental health needs treated equally. The relationship between physical and mental health is such that poor mental health is linked with a higher risk of physical health problems and poor physical health is linked with poor mental health.

Ensuring access to appropriate treatment for people with mental health needs is a major policy concern. Mental health care has suffered from systemic neglect and a lack of appropriate services. The neglect of people with severe and enduring mental illness has negative outcomes for individuals and their families. The neglect of mental health is across the spectrum at policy, institutional, organisational and individual levels. The Bill aims to offer hope for better mental health care by ensuring that vulnerable persons with mental illness are cared for efficiently and have parity of esteem with those treated for physical health difficulties. Access to counselling can often be a barrier to people obtaining the appropriate mental health supports. Sinn Féin in government would introduce universal free counselling on GP referral.

Our alternative budget also provides an increase in investment in 24-7 crisis intervention services. If I hurt my head at any hour of the day, I will get the treatment I need. However, if I have an issue going on inside my head, the chances are I will not receive the appropriate treatment. These are only two of the changes we would make in mental health provision. These would go some way to restore the parity of esteem between mental and physical health.

This legislation aims to compel a change in attitudes towards mental health at the highest level of policymaking and governance. If this change in attitude occurs at the highest level, it will filter down to all levels of society and will see the stigma often associated with mental health conditions lessened. We need to break this stigma once and for all.

The effective integration of mental and physical health services is particularly important. This Bill will place a duty on the Minister for Health to promote health parity and ensure all organisations within the health system meet parity obligations in respect of mental health. For example, no additional resources were allocated to mental health supports in the Government's winter plan. No funding has been set out for this, which shows clearly the lack of parity of esteem between mental and physical healthcare in Ireland.

This, however, is a Bill of hope. It will give hope to any person suffering from mental health problems that he or she will be receive the right treatment at the right time. It is easy to lose hope right now. When restrictions were brought in first, many people, including myself, thought that these would be short-term measures and that we would be back to normality soon.

The longer the pandemic has gone on, the more messages I have received of pain and desperation from people who see no end to this. I cannot tell people when this will end but I can tell them that it will end and we will come out the other side.

People need hope right now. People need assurances that the increase in mental health issues arising from Covid will be treated in a respectful and appropriate manner. In the meantime, the most important thing we can do is be kind to each other, and to respect each other. It is perfectly okay not to be okay right now. It is normal to feel anxious, frightened, frustrated or worried about things that one has no control of. Be kind and reach out, if you are not feeling okay. You are not alone.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** It is not opposed. I thank Deputy Ward for his initiative in putting forward this Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The debate is adjourned, in accordance with Standing Orders, to the next day on which Private Members' business is to be taken.

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

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move:

Notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or the order of the Dáil of Tuesday, that:

(a) the Further Revised Estimate for public services for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media be taken now without debate; and

(b) the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of No. 12a, statements and questions and answers on Covid-19, which shall be taken this evening immediately following a 20-minute sanitisation so following the Trade Union Representation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2018. The statements and questions and answers shall be confined to a single round which shall not exceed 95 minutes, including ten-minute slots each for the Minister and parties and groups, and an additional five-minute slot for Sinn Féin, which shall immediately precede a ten-minute statement in reply by the Minister, and all Members may share time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is that proposal agreed?

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** That proposal is not agreed.

We are to have a 100-minute debate on health tonight starting at 8 o'clock. If the Ceann Comhairle will recall, the Taoiseach here on Tuesday, disagreed with the way that debates were being shoehorned and crammed into the middle of the week. The Taoiseach said, "If we want

a serious debate ... we should have it on Friday morning and I will take part in [that debate].” We are not having a serious debate. It is being crammed in here on Thursday and the Taoiseach is not taking part in it. We agreed here in the House on Tuesday that he would have a serious debate here on Friday morning to discuss the abject confusion there is across the country regarding level 3 and the chaos that has been caused by regulations. As I pointed out to him then, everyone in this country knows when and where they can get a pint, but what do I say to my constituent in her 80s who has an adult child with an intellectual disability and who does not know when the training centre for her son will open? We do not know the details. We want a proper debate.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We cannot go into a lengthy debate on it.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We wrote to the Business Committee on Tuesday asking for a proper debate on Covid strategy. There has been much discussion and kerfuffle about the spat between the Tánaiste and the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET. Certainly, questions have to be asked and answered about all of that but there is a much more important issue, which is, how are we going to respond to what is an escalating crisis with Covid infections rising? We need a very serious discussion about strategy. We need to hear the options laid out. We need to hear what data are available and how we can make a mature decision where political game-playing is left aside.

We have set out our stall. We believe the public health advice should be followed because the situation is dire. Others disagree, but there has not been a proper debate. To have a debate on the graveyard shift tonight and not have the promised discussion tomorrow is wrong. There simply is not enough time tonight to consider, question and discuss the very serious situation we have facing us and the need for a mature, serious and urgent response that the public can buy into. I have a different view from Deputy Naughten about what we need to do but I absolutely agree we need a serious, rounded, full and extensive debate, and that should include sitting tomorrow.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Can I clarify whether we are dealing with the business for next week, now or next?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No. We are dealing with this proposal for this evening.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I will say a few words on this proposal. On Tuesday, the matter was raised by a range of Members, including myself, and the Taoiseach stated that we would have statements on Friday and that he would be there. That is on the Dáil record.

On what is being offered tonight, I had proposed earlier that we would have statements similar to Thursday last where we would have ten minutes across the board with statements and questions. I will be fair and acknowledge that the Government has compromised to agree to that. However, what my colleagues said is also fair. Friday was originally agreed. If something is agreed here and we work on that basis, it should not be changed. If the Deputies wish to push this further, I will support them but here has been compromise. I acknowledge that there are statements and questions tonight, which is critically important.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I concur with all the other speakers. If one wants to have a proper debate, I question going late into the night with the debate when everyone is tired. The previous two sittings have been late. Members want a proper debate. The House should sit on Friday where everyone would have a night's sleep and we would have full discussions on



this. Even with the way the structure is set out for debates at present, for the likes of the Rural Independents to get in, the structure is all wrong.

The Government parties all want to speak first. They will put people to sleep. People want us to ask questions of them and they want them to answer to us. They do not want to have to wait. Members ran into this Chamber last week and on RTÉ were shown to be winded and unable to speak because of their slots. This has to change. We need proper debate, proper dialogue and a proper timetable where everyone can come in and debate properly.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach might think that some of us are blind but, thankfully, we are not deaf. On Tuesday, he made a clear commitment. He said that he would have no problem in having a full and wholesome debate on Friday. He stated that he would partake of that debate. What has happened since? What has changed? Considering the hundreds of thousands of people who have been impacted in such a devastating way, with their work taken from them and the rug pulled from under them, the courtesy we are showing them in debating their issues is to cram this debate in late on a Thursday night. Neither I nor my colleagues think that is proper behaviour. That is not dealing with people's issues and problems in a sincere and meaningful way. Where is the word the Taoiseach gave on Tuesday? What changed? We were to hold a Friday debate and we are cramming it in tonight.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** For completeness, the Business Committee this morning discussed this proposal for 35 minutes. Whatever about tomorrow, next week or whenever else, the specific request for tonight was for questions and answers. The Government is now proposing to facilitate the request for questions and answers. The only proposal before us is the proposal for tonight's sitting. What we are talking about is whether that should go ahead or not? There is no other proposal before the House.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** On a point of order-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** What is the point of order?

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** -----I seek clarity on whether there was any discussion about the Friday sitting. Did that just disappear?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is not a point of order.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Sorry, it is a point of clarification. Am I allowed that?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Yes, there was reference to a Friday sitting. We are here. This is Dáil Éireann and we have a specific proposal before us and it is only this proposal that we can deal with. Are Deputies happy to proceed with the Government's proposal to have a question and answer session this evening or not? It is as simple as that.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We would like to hear from the Government whether it will honour the commitment made by the Taoiseach that he would participate in a discussion on Friday?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Okay.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** This is a serious discussion. Things have changed; everyone knows that. It is not just questions that need to be put to the Minister of Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, late at night. We need to hear from the Head of Government what will be the

strategy from here and what are the impacts of taking particular strategic options. That cannot be squashed into the graveyard shift alone. We should have the debate tonight, but we have to have the Friday sitting.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In fairness, we are only looking at the proposal for this evening. Practically every day the House has sat since shortly after the general election, we have had discussions on Covid and, unfortunately, we will be required to continue to have more discussions on Covid. It ain't going away and nor will the requirement for discussions. Will the Chief Whip please explain the position?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** As the Ceann Comhairle said, the Business Committee spent a considerable time today discussing this. The Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is willing to partake in statements and questions and answers this evening which is why we made the proposal. We sought to accommodate a discussion in this evening's debate and time was provided at the end of today. The Opposition requested a debate on Covid. Last week, all Government time was provided for a debate on Covid. As the Ceann Comhairle said, there will continue to be regular debates on this issue. It is unfortunate that much of the debate has involved the politicisation of the public health approach. Many Opposition Deputies are trying to undermine the bona fide attempts by the Government to suppress the virus and bring it under control. That is a serious issue in the context of public health messaging that many Opposition Deputies, although not all, are attacking the Government strategy of suppressing the virus and giving clear and concise information to the public on how we need to tackle it. The framework for that is very clear.

I accept that Deputy Boyd Barrett has a different view but other Members seem to want to go back to level 1 or 2. We are clear about what we have set out, how we want to proceed and how to ensure enforcement and compliance at level 3 to suppress the virus. The Minister for Health will be before the Dáil this evening. We are accommodating that in the schedule and I am sure there will be debate on this issue next week and the week after that. Deputies are not being genuine if they seek questions and answers at a private meeting of the Business Committee, which the Government has been willing to facilitate, and then come into the Chamber and try to move the goalposts by looking for something else.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We raised the issue.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Government is facilitating the request and believes we should proceed on that basis.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I take it the House is amenable to the proposal for this evening's sitting and the arrangements as set out by the Government Chief Whip.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Do we have a choice?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the proposal agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Can we put the proposal for the Friday sitting?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No, I do not think there is a facility to make such a proposal. The Deputy might take up the matter next week on Leaders' Questions or whatever the case may be.

**Estimates for Public Services 2020: Motion**

**Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I move the following Estimate for Public Services 2020:

**Vote 33 - Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Further Revised Estimate)**

That a sum not exceeding €754,609,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2020, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain subsidies and grants and that a sum not exceeding €32,796,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Boyd Barrett has a point of order.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I raised at the Business Committee earlier today the approval of the Revised Estimate by the arts and culture committee - I will not give it its new name as it is so long I cannot remember it. We are discussing public money and a very serious matter. The committee only signed off on the Estimates yesterday and they have come to the House today. As of this morning at least, none of us, apart from the members of the committee, has seen the Estimates and we do not know what the considerations are, yet we are being asked to push a Revised Estimate through on the nod. I take the point that these are additional expenditures for the arts and no one wants to stop additional expenditure. Some might want to see much more expenditure. However, there is a problem with the Dáil pushing through significant additional expenditures of public money on the nod without proper discussion and a report on the considerations from the committee. I do not want to hold up the business of the Dáil but I see that as a problem. It is important to underline, as was pointed out at the Business Committee today, that the option that Deputies had to attend meetings of committees of which they are not members has now effectively ceased. In the past, a Member who was not a member of a committee could still attend, listen and speak. That is no longer an option. Therefore, when it comes to Estimates and other matters arising out of committee proceedings, a whole layer of Deputies is simply excluded from the process. That is not great legislative or financial oversight.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am a business person. I have been self-employed all my life. If a business project is before me and I want to see its finances, I will look at its figures and discuss them. I had nothing in front of me at the Business Committee meeting this morning. Nothing was handed to me to allow me to make a decision on finances. I understand the Revised Estimate is for 2020. To run a business properly, one must have the figures. Deputies must be allowed to go through the figures to see everything is correct and to ask questions. To have only one hour's notice that this Revised Estimate will be before the House is not right. I would like to have time to look through the figures and all the documentation. I am not happy that this did not happen.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** These are matters that are somewhat outside the remit of the Minister. They are procedural issues. When the Estimates are published and distributed to the members of the select committee, they are also made available to Members of the House. Some may not be in the habit of studying Estimates documents that are sent to them but they were

distributed. In addition, this morning, after Deputies raised concerns about this, we asked that a briefing note be circulated to Members in advance of this session. I assume they have got that. It was to set out the issues that arose at the committee meeting and the proposals that had been made.

I further accept that Deputy Boyd Barrett makes a reasonable point about process, but it is not something that the Minister can deal with here. It applies to all committees. Perhaps a Dáil reform committee or the Business Committee needs to examine the process around how Members have ready access to the maximum relevant information. In this instance, we are simply being asked to approve retrospectively money that has been vital to this Minister to support her various areas of initiative.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The point needed to be registered. It was a fair point.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Yes. It is registered. Can we now agree the Revised Estimate?

Vote put and agreed to.

### **Sittings and Business of Dáil: Motion**

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, or the Order of the Dáil of 10th September, 2020, and unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on 13th, 14th and 15th October, 2020:

- (1) (i) the Dáil shall meet at 1 p.m. on Tuesday, and at 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday;
- (ii) on Wednesday, the Dáil shall adjourn not later than 10 p.m.;
- (iii) on Thursday, the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of topical issues;
- (iv) the Dáil shall meet in the Convention Centre Dublin on Tuesday and in Leinster House on Wednesday;
- (v) Leaders' Questions within the meaning of Standing Order 36 shall not be taken on Tuesday, and on Wednesday and Thursday shall be taken as the second item of business after Oral Questions;
- (vi) there shall be no Order of Business on Tuesday within the meaning of Standing Order 35;
- (vii) within the meaning of Standing Order 35, there shall be no questions on promised legislation on Tuesday or Wednesday;
- (viii) Oral Questions to a member of the Government under Standing Order 46(1) (b) shall be taken on Wednesday and Thursday at 10.30 a.m.; otherwise no Oral Questions under Standing Order 46(1) shall be taken: Provided that written questions under Standing Order 50(2) shall appear on the Order Paper and be answered in the normal way;
- (ix) private members' business shall not be taken;

(x) topical issues under Standing Order 37 shall not be taken on Tuesday or Wednesday and shall be taken on Thursday as the last item of business;

(xi) leave may not be sought under Standing Order 42 to adjourn the Dáil on a specific and important matter of public interest;

(xii) no Committee report shall be taken on Thursday evening under Standing Order 159(2);

(xiii) any divisions demanded on Tuesday shall be taken immediately;

(xiv) the weekly division time shall be taken on Tuesday night, as outlined in paragraph (2)(iii); and

(2) in relation to the sitting of the Dáil on Tuesday, 13th October, 2020, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the Dáil shall sit later than 11.17 p.m. and the motion for the General Financial Resolution shall be moved not later than 12 midnight; and

(ii) subject to subparagraph (iii), the business to be transacted shall be the Budget Statements and Financial Motions by Deputy Pascal Donohoe, Minister for Finance, and Deputy Michael McGrath, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the Budget statements of Minister Donohoe and Minister McGrath shall not exceed 45 minutes each;

(b) following the Budget statements of the Ministers, statements may be made by the spokespersons on Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform for the parties and groups in Opposition in the following order and in accordance with the following arrangements:

— Sinn Féin – not exceeding 60 minutes in the aggregate, and

— the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Solidarity-People Before Profit, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group – not exceeding 45 minutes in the aggregate each,

and all members may share their time; and

(c) following the statements, the sitting shall be suspended for 30 minutes, and on the resumption of the sitting, a Minister or Minister of State shall move an allocation of time motion for the Financial Motions; and

(iii) upon the moving of the General Financial Resolution, the Motion re the National Surplus (Reserve Fund for Exceptional Contingencies) Act 2019 shall be taken without debate, immediately followed by the weekly division time, and the Dáil shall adjourn forthwith, either on the conclusion of proceedings on the Motion re the National Surplus (Reserve Fund for Exceptional Contingencies) Act 2019, or on the conclusion of the weekly division time, as appropriate; and

(3) in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on Wednesday and Thursday, 14th October



and 15th October, 2020, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the 20-minute sanitisation SOS's shall take place—

(a) on Wednesday, immediately following Leaders' Questions and the Labour Party Leader's statement, and

(b) on Thursday, immediately following Questions on Promised Legislation, and at 4 p.m.;

(ii) the business to be transacted shall be the business outlined in this Resolution along with the resumed debate on the General Financial Resolution, to which the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) on Wednesday—

(I) following the sanitisation SOS after Leaders' Questions, Leaders' speeches shall be taken, in the following order and in accordance with the following arrangements:

— Taoiseach and Tánaiste — not exceeding 30 minutes each;

— Green Party — not exceeding 20 minutes;

— Sinn Féin — not exceeding 30 minutes;

— the Labour Party — not exceeding 15 minutes;

— (following the sanitisation SOS) Social Democrats, Solidarity-People Before Profit, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group — not exceeding 15 minutes each,

and all members may share time; and

(II) the suspension of sitting under Standing Order 25(1) shall take place on the conclusion of Leaders' speeches, and shall continue until 5.30 p.m.; and

(b) on Wednesday and Thursday—

(I) apart from the Leaders' speeches, the resumed debate on the General Financial Resolution shall be conducted in 100-minute speaking rounds, in accordance with the arrangements contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform adopted by Order of the Dáil on 30th July, 2020; and

(II) when there are no further members offering, the debate shall adjourn, and, in any event, on Thursday 15th October, 2020, the debate shall adjourn not later than 4 p.m.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Regarding Wednesday's proposal, our party cannot accept the schedule for leaders' statements as laid out - the Taoiseach at 30 minutes, the Tánaiste at 30 minutes and the Green Party at 20 minutes, which is a run of an hour and 20 minutes. We again propose that their contributions be interspersed. It is in the public interest to have back

and forth. We propose that the schedule be the Taoiseach at 30 minutes, Sinn Féin at 30 minutes, the Tánaiste at 30 minutes, the Labour Party at 15 minutes, the Green Party at 20 minutes, the Social Democrats at 15 minutes and so on. We feel strongly about this and I put it to the Government to agree.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** The tradition is that Government representatives in a coalition speak on budget day after the budget. This schedule is not breaking with that tradition. We have a three-party Government and the schedule is not unreasonable at all. It is the custom of the House and to depart from it would be unprecedented.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** May I respond to that?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Yes.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** My understanding is that, historically, we would not have a Government slot of an hour and 20 minutes for leaders' statements. It would be a very long time before the Opposition could respond. It is too long and unwieldy. I ask that the Government reconsider.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** This is a three-party coalition, which is an unusual situation. However, there is adequate time for the Opposition parties to respond. There will also be loads of time next week for the Opposition to go through the budget with a fine-tooth comb and speak about all of the budget's various elements. The schedule is not unreasonable. The people watching want to see both sides of the argument; they want to see what the Government is proposing and how the Opposition responds to the budget. This schedule is the Government's proposal, which is very much in keeping with tradition.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Can I take it that, notwithstanding the protests, the proposals for next week-----

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Not agreed.

Question put: , "That the proposal for dealing with next week's business be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 19; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	

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<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Denise Mitchell and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

*Sitting suspended at 1.50 p.m. and resumed at 2.10 p.m.*

### **Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2019: Ordú don Dara Céim**

#### **Official Languages (Amendment) Bill 2019: Order for Second Stage**

Acht do leasú agus do leathnú Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, 2003; do leasú Acht na nGiúirí, 1976; agus do dhéanamh socrú i dtaobh nithe gaolmhara.

Bill entitled an Act to amend and extend the Official Languages Act 2003; to amend the Juries Act 1976; and to provide for related matters.

**Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht(Deputy Catherine Martin):** Tairgim: “Go dtógfar an Dara Céim anois.”

I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

**Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2019: An Dara Céim**

**Official Languages (Amendment) Bill 2019: Second Stage**

**Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht(Deputy Catherine Martin):** Tairgim: “Go léifear an Bille an Dara hUair anois.”

Is cúis áthais dom tús a chur leis an díospóireacht maidir le Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2019. Táim anseo in éineacht leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, chun tábhacht an Bhille seo a léiriú do phobal na tíre i gcoitinne agus do phobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta ach go háirithe.

Mar Aire ar a bhfuil freagracht as an turasóireacht, an cultúr, an ealaín, an Ghaeltacht, an spóirt agus na meáin, fáiltím roimh an deis seo labhairt leis an Dáil faoin mBille. Is onóir as cuimse domsa a bheith ceaptha mar Aire le freagracht as an nGaeltacht agus leanfaidh mé ag troid ar son na Gaeilge gach aon lá ag bord an Rialtais i dteannta leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers.

Táim fiordhílis dár dteanga agus bródúil as a hoidhreacht shaibhir. Mar is eol don Teach, mar Theachta Dála le ceithre bliana anuas, déanaim iarracht i gcónaí solas a lasadh ar an nGaeilge leis an méid a deirim ar urlár na Dála agus leis an méid a dhéanaim sa saol poiblí.

Bhí sé an-tábhachtach dom, mar sin, agus mé i mbun cainteanna rialtais go mbeadh gealltais dhearfacha maidir leis an nGaeilge sa chlár Rialtais. Tá sé luaite go sonrach go bhfuil sé mar fhís againn mar Rialtas go ndéanfar an Ghaeilge a chothú agus a chur chun cinn. Tuigeann muid an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an teanga mar chéad teanga oifigiúil an Stáit, mar chuid luachmhar d’oidhreacht an oileáin seo agus, níos tábhachtaí fós, mar theanga bheo i measc pobail ar fud na tíre agus sa Ghaeltacht ach go háirithe. Tá sé mar sprioc againn cur le húsáid na teanga gach aon lá.

Ar na geallúintí eile atá sa chlár Rialtais i dtaobh na Gaeilge, tá an méid seo a leanas: déanfar an Ghaeltacht, tobar na teanga, a chaomhnú agus a chosaint; cabhróimid leis an nGaeilge a chur chun cinn lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht agus i measc an aosa óig trí ardáin a fhorbairt dóibh ar TG4, Raidió na Gaeltachta, RTÉ agus Raidió Rí-Rá; cuirfimid an Ghaeilge chun cinn in áiteanna oibre agus sóisialta le cúnamh Chonradh na Gaeilge agus eagraíochtaí eile agus cuirfimid feachtas náisiúnta ar bun sna meáin mar chuid den obair seo; tacófar le TG4, Raidió na Gaeltachta agus ardáin eile le déanamh cinnte de go dtabharfar aitheantas cuí do ról na Gaeilge; agus déanfar an scéim “Teanga Tí”, scéim de chuid Ghlór na nGael, a leathnú agus bhreathnófaí ar scéimeanna eile dá leithéid a thabhairt isteach. Tá sé i gceist againn freisin ionaid Ghaeilge a fhorbairt i mBaile Átha Cliath agus ar fud na tíre. Déanfar líon na ndaltaí a bhfuil oideachas lán-Ghaeilge á chur orthu a dhúbailt laistigh de dheich mbliana, cuirfear Gaelscoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí ar fáil san áit a bhfuil éileamh láidir ar a leithéid agus bunófar ciste barr feabhais don oideachas Gaeilge. Tabharfar isteach polasaí cuimsitheach don oideachas Gaeilge ón ré-amhscoil go dtí na coláistí oiliúna agus cuirfear tacaíocht bhreise ar fáil don Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta.

Maidir le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta, gheall muid go gcuirfeadh muid tacaíocht ar fáil do chruthú fostaíochta agus don phróiseas pleanála teanga trí dhóthain maoinithe a chur ar fáil don údarás. Tuigim go maith an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an obair atá ar bun ag an údarás ar son

na Gaeltachta ar bhonn leanúnach. De bharr na hoibre seo, tá deiseanna fostaíochta agus fiontraíochta cothaithe agus cruthaithe i gceantair nach bhfaigheadh na deiseanna sin murach gur ann don eagraíocht. Cheana féin, tá ciste breise caipitil ar fiú €8 milliún é curtha ar fáil ag an Rialtas nua don údarás mar chuid de phacáiste spreagtha an Rialtais a fógraíodh i mí Iúil. Sílim go léiríonn sé seo cheana féin chomh tiomanta is atáimid do bhuiséid an údaráis a mhéadú agus gan an Rialtas nua seo ach cúpla mí ar an bhfód.

Tá muid tiomanta mar Rialtas do chur i bhfeidhm an Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030. Tá an próiseas pleanála teanga ag teacht faoi bhláth sa Ghaeltacht anois agus tá plean gníomhaíochta cúig-bliana don Ghaeilge á chur i bhfeidhm faoi láthair. Amárach, tá súil againn an chéad tuarascáil bhliantúil ar an bplean gníomhaíochta a fhoilsiú, rud a thabharfaidh léargas ar dhul chun cinn na straitéise. Feicfidh daoine an méid atá á dhéanamh faoi scáth na straitéise.

Tugann sé seo mé go dtí an Bille teanga. Tá áthas orm go bhfuil muid anseo ag plé an Bhille seo. Cé gur fáiltíodh roimh fhoilsiú an Bhille anuraidh, bhí roinnt mhaith ag maíomh gur theastaigh Bille níos láidre, an Coimisinéir Teanga agus Conradh na Gaeilge ina measc. D’aithin an Rialtas é seo agus gealladh sa chlár Rialtais go dtabharfaí Bille níos láidre chun cinn agus go mbeadh sé achtaithe roimh dheireadh na bliana. Tá tacaíocht an Rialtais faighte anois roinnt leasuithe a mholadh a láidreoidh an Bille agus beidh an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, in ann na leasuithe sin a chur i láthair níos déanaí.

Mar a dúirt mé cheana, is onóir mhór domsa a bheith ceaptha mar Aire a bhfuil freagracht as an nGaeltacht agam agus ba mhian liom ár dteanga dhúchais a chur chun cinn, a neartú agus a fhás ní hamháin sa Ghaeltacht, ach ar fud ár n-oileáin. Chun é seo a dhéanamh, ní mór tacaíocht oifigiúil an Stáit a bheith taobh thiar di. Tuigeann muid ar fad go bhfuil stádas ar leith ag an nGaeilge i mBunreacht na hÉireann mar chéad teanga oifigiúil an Stáit. Is tríd an reachtaíocht a thugtar feidhm don stádas sin agus sin é an fáth go bhfuil an Bille seo chomh tábhachtach sin. Creidim go mbeidh muid in ann, tríd an mBille seo, timpeallacht a chruthú inar féidir feabhas a chur ar sholáthar seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge, mar is cóir, agus freastal mar is ceart ar phobal Gaeilge na tíre seo. Mar sin, molaim an Bille seo don Teach.

**Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Nuair a aontaíodh an clár Rialtais i mí an Mheithimh seo caite, tugadh gealltanais i leith na Gaeilge agus gealladh go sonrach go n-achtófar Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2019 roimh dheireadh na bliana seo. Mar Phríomh-Aoire an Rialtais agus Aire Stáit ar a bhfuil freagracht as an nGaeltacht, cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an deis seo labhairt sa Dáil agus an Bille a chur i láthair.

Thug mé cuairt ar Ghaeltacht agus cathair na Gaillimhe le déanaí. Le linn na cuairte sin, chas mé leis an gCoimisinéir Teanga agus phléigh muid an gá le seirbhísí poiblí i nGaeilge a chur ar fáil do phobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta. Le linn mo chuairte, chas mé le roinnt cumainn spóirt sa chathair féin agus ar imeall na cathrach, Cumann Peile Bhearna agus Cumann Lúthchleas Gael Bhaile Chláir san áireamh. Pléadh na hiarrachtaí atá ar bun sna cumainn sin chun an teanga a chur chun cinn mar chuid den phróiseas pleanála teanga. Chonaic mé an t-ionad Gaeilge nua atá á thógáil ag pobal teanga Chnoc na Cathrach le cúnamh d’os cionn €800,000 ó mo Roinn. Bhí mé an-tógtha leis an bhfuinneamh agus leis an ngrá a bhí ag na grúpaí seo don teanga.

Mar is eol don Teach, tá pobal mór Gaeilge ní amháin i nGaillimh ach ar fud na tíre, agus caithfidh, mar Rialtas, freastal ar riachtanais teanga an phobail sin. Tá súil agam go gcothóidh



an Bille seo timpeallacht inar féidir leis an Stát feidhmiú mar chrann taca pobal Gaeilge na tíre seo.

Agus mé ag trácht ar Ghaillimh, ní mór dom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Seanadóir Kyne, iar-Aire Stáit ar a raibh freagracht as an nGaeltacht, a d'fhoilsigh an Bille seo anuraidh. Tá a fhios agam gur chuir an Seanadóir Kyne go leor oibre isteach sa Bhille seo agus ba mhaith liom aitheantas a thabhairt don obair sin. Sular dréachtaíodh an Bille seo, cuireadh tréimhse chomhairliúcháin ar bun leis na páirtithe leasmhara éagsúla. Leagadh na ceannteidil faoi bhráid Chomhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus na nOileán agus foilsíodh tuarascáil an chomhchoiste ag eascairt as an bpróiseas seo roimh samhradh 2018. Ba mhór an chabhair í tuarascáil an chomhchoiste d'oifigigh mo Roinne agus an Bille Teanga á dhréachtú acu agus gabhaim buíochas leis an gcomhchoiste as an ionchur luachmhar sin sa bpróiseas.

Mar luaigh mé, is i mí na Nollag seo caite a d'fhoilsigh an Rialtas Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2019. Bhí tús curtha leis an Dara Céim ag an am sin, agus thug iar-Aire Stáit na Gaeltachta, an Seanadóir Seán Kyne, léargas cuimsitheach ar na trí fhorálach déag atá le fáil sa Bhille don Teach ag an tráth sin. Tá iarracht déanta sa Bhille dul i ngleic le dhá mhórchéist – na scéimeanna teanga agus an earcaíocht sa tSeirbhís Phoiblí. Sílim go bhfuil sé tábhachtach agus muid ag cur tús leis an Dara Céim arís, go bhfillfeadh mé ar phríomhfhorálacha an Bhille agus iad a chur i láthair don Teach.

Tugtar téarmaíocht isteach sa Phríomh-Acht a tháinig chun cinn den chéad uair in Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 agus a úsáidtear go forleathan anois sa phróiseas pleanála teanga. San áireamh anseo tá na téarmaí seo: limistéar pleanála teanga Gaeltachta, baile seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus líonra Gaeilge. Tugtar cumhacht don Rialtas duine laistigh de chomhlacht poiblí a shainainmniú mar cheann comhlachta phoiblí chun críocha an Phríomh-Achta sa chás go mbeidh post cinn chomhlachta phoiblí folamh. Leis an bhforáil seo, déanfar cinnte de go leanfar leis na hoibleagáidí atá ar chomhlachtaí poiblí faoi réim an Phríomh-Achta a chomhlíonadh.

Is le cearta an duine an leagan Gaeilge dá ainm nó dá hainm a úsáid chomh maith le seoladh nó teideal Gaeilge a úsáid a bhaineann alt 4. Leis an alt seo, leasaítear alt 9 den Phríomh-Acht agus tugtar isteach dualgas ar chomhlachtaí poiblí forordaithe a éascú, go príomha trí choigeartú a dhéanamh ar a gcórais teicneolaíochta faisnéise, go ndéanfar ainm, seoladh nó teideal duine i nGaeilge a úsáid. Tá tábhacht ar leith ag baint leis an bhforáil seo i limistéir Ghaeltachta.

Foráiltear gur chóir foirmeacha oifigiúla a fhoilsiú i nGaeilge nó go dátheangach i nGaeilge agus i mBéarla, agus foráiltear freisin an modh ar ar chóir é sin a dhéanamh. Foráiltear gur chóir, i gcás go mbeidh lógó á athnuachan nó á athrú ag comhlacht poiblí láithreach, gur i nGaeilge nó sa dá theanga oifigiúla a bheidh an lógó nua. Déantar foráil leis freisin maidir le cothroime idir an dá theanga sna lógónna sin. Foráiltear gur i nGaeilge nó i nGaeilge agus i mBéarla araon a bheidh ainm comhlachta reachtúil nuabhunaithe. Foráiltear go mbunófar coiste reachtúil, An Coiste Comhairleach um Sheirbhísí Gaeilge, agus leagfar amach ann téarmaí maidir lena chomhaltas, lena fheidhmeanna agus lena nósanna imeachta tuairiscithe, lena n-áirítear plean náisiúnta a fhoilsiú ar mhaithe le soláthar seirbhísí poiblí trí mheán na Gaeilge a mhéadú.

Má tá an córas nua seo chun a bheith éifeachtach, beidh orainn feabhas a chur ar chúrsaí earcaíochta. Is é ceann de na príomhfhadhbanna a chuireann bac ar sheirbhísí a chur ar fáil trí Ghaeilge ná nach bhfuil na daoine leis na scileanna cuí fostaithe sna hoifigí cuí. Má tá muid chun feabhas a chur air seo, caithfidh an Stát líon na bhfostaithe Stáit atá in ann seirbhísí a chur

ar fáil trí Ghaeilge a mhéadú agus a chinntiú go bhfuil Gaeilge ar a dtoil ag oifigigh Stáit atá ag feidhmiú i gceantair Ghaeltachta.

Beidh sé mar chuspóir sa Bhille go mbeidh 20% de na daoine nua a earcófar don tseirbhís phoiblí ina gcainteoirí Gaeilge, go mbeidh gach oifig phoiblí atá lonnaithe sa Ghaeltacht ag feidhmiú trí Ghaeilge agus go mbeidh na comhlachtaí in ann freastal ar an éileamh ón bpobal ar sheirbhísí trí Ghaeilge. Ar an mbealach seo tá sé i gceist againn tógáil, ar bhonn chéimiúil, ar líon na bhfostaithe le Gaeilge agus ag eascairt as sin, go mbeimid in ann feabhas a chur ar sholáthar seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge.

Baineann alt 7 den Bhille le córas caighdeán teanga – tá sé i gceist iad a thabhairt isteach in ionad chóras láithreach na scéimeanna teanga. Tá an córas sin cáinte ag an gCoimisinéir Teanga a léirigh na heasnamh sa tuarascáil dá chuid Tráchttaireacht ar Chóras na Scéimeanna Teanga, a foilsíodh in 2017.

Faoin gcóras nua, bheadh rangú le déanamh ar chomhlachtaí poiblí, ag baint úsáide as rialacháin chun caighdeán a leagan síos do na comhlachtaí sin. Ar an mbealach seo, beidh muid in ann a chinntiú go mbeidh na caighdeáin is airde ó thaobh úsáid na Gaeilge de bainteach leis na heagraíochtaí a bhíonn ag soláthar seirbhísí don phobal, pobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta san áireamh.

Ceadaítear sa Bhille an tagairt don Choimisiún Logainmneacha sa Phríomh-Acht a scríosadh. Is gá an leasú seo a dhéanamh i bhfianaise na breithe a thug an Rialtas deireadh a chur leis an gCoimisiún Logainmneacha sa bhliain 2012, mar chuid dá Phlean um Athchóiriú na Seirbhíse Poiblí. Cuireadh coiste saineolaithe, arna cheapadh ag an Aire ar bhonn riaracháin, in ionad an Choimisiúin Logainmneacha.

Déantar foráil sa Bhille maidir le próiseas comhchomhairliúcháin sula ndéanfaidh an tAire Ordú Logainmneacha nó sula leasaítear nó sula gcúlghairtear é. Déantar foráil maidir le fógra dátheangach a eisiúint nuair a dhéantar duine a thoghairm chun fónamh mar ghiúróir. Tá an fhoráil seo á lorg ag pobal labhartha na Gaeilge le fada.

Cé gur fáiltíodh é roimh fhoilsiú an Bhille anuraidh, bhí roinnt mhaith ag maíomh gur theastaigh Bille níos láidre, an Coimisinéir Teanga agus Conradh na Gaeilge ina measc. Tá sé seo aitheanta ag an Rialtas agus gealladh sa chlár Rialtais go dtabharfaí Bille níos láidre chun cinn agus go mbeadh sé achtaithe roimh dheireadh na bliana. Tá tacaíocht an Rialtais faighte agam féin agus ag an Aire Martin roinnt leasuithe a mholadh a láidreoidh an Bille, agus tá súil agam iad sin a chur i bhur láthair níos déanaí sa phlé inniu.

Ag an bpointe seo, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a chur in iúl don Teach as an tacaíocht leanúnach a thug sibh d'oifigigh mo Roinne le linn an phróisis seo. Tá an t-ádh dearg orainn go bhfuil dea-thoil i leith na Gaeilge le feiceáil sa phobal i gcoitinne. Is cuid riachtanach d'oidhreacht bheo an Stáit an Ghaeilge agus is acmhainn nádúrtha thábhachtach sa Ghaeltacht í. Teastaíonn reachtaíocht uainn a chabhraíonn linn an fhís atá léirithe sa Bhunreacht a bhaint amach agus a chuidíonn linn an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn san aonú aois is fiche.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus leis an Aire as Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2019 a chur faoinár mbráid. Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille agus roimh na leasuithe. Tá súil agam nach bhfuil mé róthapa nuair a deirim go gcuirfidh mé fáilte roimh na leasuithe eile a bheidh ag teacht ar Chéim an Choiste, chun a dhéanamh cinnte de nuair a bheimid críochnaithe leis an mBille seo go mbeidh an tAcht seo ar

an Acht is foirfe is féidir linn a dhéanamh ag an am seo. Ar a lán bealaí is lá cinniúnach don Ghaeilge atá ann. Tá dhá shlí chun tabhairt faoi chearta a thabhairt do phobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta. Is é seo slí amháin chun déileáil le fadhbanna ó thaobh an mhaorlathais de. Tá súil agam nach bhfuilimid ag cothú nó ag cur leis an bureaucracy a bhíonn timpeall ar rudaí mar seo agus an fad a bhí ann le cearta a bhronnadh nó a thabhairt do lucht na Gaeilge, mar tá siad acu cheana féin, ach ní raibh siad in ann na cearta sin a fháil dóibh féin.

Ba chóir, ar shlí amháin, Operation Fanacht a thabhairt ar an mBille seo mar táimid tar éis a bheith ag fanacht le tamall fada de bhlianta air seo. Measaim gurbh é an t-iar-Aire agus t-iar-Theachta Dinny McGinley in 2011 a lorg go mbeadh leasú iomlán déanta ar Acht na dTeanga-cha Oifigiúla a tháinig isteach in 2004. Is cuimhin liomsa gurbh é ceann de na chéad rudaí a bhí orm tabhairt faoi mar Theachta nua in 2002 ná an Bille sin agus cé chomh casta is a bhí sé ag an am sin. Bhí córas nua á mholadh san Acht a bhí ann ag an am sin agus bhí the devil and all chun tarlú de thairbhe an Achta sin. Táimid fós ag an staid ina rabhamar ar mhórán bealaí nó imithe siar ó staid a bhíomar chomh fada siar le 2002. Is trua sin mar níor tharla an t-athrú poirt a bhíomar ag súil leis ag an am. Bhí muinín curtha againn sa státchóras, muinín nach raibh tuillte aige ag an am agus nach bhfuil tuillte fós ina iomlán. Tá súil agam go bhfuilim mícheart agus go bhfuil athrú poirt tagtha orthu siúd atá i gceannas na Ranna Stáit ar fad atá tar éis loiceadh ar an nGaeilge agus ar chearta Gaeilgeoirí sa tír seo. Tá deireadh le ré an fhrustrachais atá orainn agus orthu siúd a bhfuil cónaí orthu sa Ghaeltacht, frustrachas atá an-soiléir agus ní liomsa amháin an tuairim sin má léann duine an tuarascáil chuile bhliain ón gCoimisinéir Teanga. Is léir go bhfuil fadhbanna bunúsacha ann nach féidir leis an mBille seo tabhairt fúthu.

I ndeireadh thiar thall níl ann ach Bille. Mura dtarlaíonn athrú meoin ag na céimeanna is airde agus ag gach uile chéim den státchóras, beimid ar ais anseo i gceann 20 bliain agus beidh an fhadhb ó thaobh na teanga de níos measa má táimid ag brath go huile is go hiomlán ar an státchóras. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil moladh agus ár mbuíochas á ngabháil do na heagrais phobail tríd síos na tíre atá ag cuidiú linn an Ghaeilge a tharrtháil agus an Ghaeltacht a chosaint. Seachas iadsan bheimis i sáinn agus bheadh géarchéim i bhfad níos measa againn.

Táim sásta go bhfuilim anseo agus ag déanamh plé ar cheisteanna Gaeilge agus go bhfuilimid ag díriú isteach ar roinnt de na fadhbanna a bhí aitheanta thar na mblianta. Táim sásta freisin, cosúil lena lán daoine, muinín nó ar a laghad tacú leis an athrú atá ag tarlú agus go bhfuilimid ag bogadh ó na scéimeanna teanga agus go bhfuil coiste comhairliúcháin á bhunú agus breis cumhachtaí le bheith bronnata ar an gCoimisinéir Teanga. Tacaím leis sin. Ní féidir gan tacú leis sin ach tá súil agam nach mbeimid ag cur moill ar an infheistiú ceart ó thaobh foirne de agus ar an tacaíocht leo siúd atá laistigh den státchóras a bhfuil Gaeilge acu agus a bhí i gcónaí sásta an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn.

Tabharfaidh mé sampla go gasta don Teach ar fhadhbanna, ceann amháin le déanaí, nár chóir go dtarlódh sé, agus níl mé ag caitheamh anuas ar an duine a dhein an fhadhb. Chuir mé ceisteanna isteach ag an Aire, an Teachta Eamon Ryan, ag an am agus tháinig na freagraí ar ais i mBéarla agus níor chóir go dtarlódh sé sin. Bhí mé sásta glacadh leis sin agus ghabh an duine a bhí i gceannas leithscéal. Bhí gearán curtha isteach ag an gCeann Comhairle agus fuair mé freagra ar ais ar an ngearán sin ón Roinn i mBéarla. Ní thuigeann an Roinn. Is é ceann de na fadhbanna bunúsacha ná nach dtuigeann daoine go díreach conas mar a ritheann sin liomsa nó leis an ngnáthphobal.

Táimse anseo ó 2002. Measaim go raibh dhá phíosa reachtaíochta a foilsíodh i nGaeilge a raibh mé in ann seasamh suas, labhairt as Gaeilge agus go raibh nóta nó meamram míniúcháin i

nGaeilge leis an bhfoclaíocht. Ní bhíonn sé ann de ghnáth. Tá sé sa Bhille seo mar go bhfuil an Bille seo foilsithe go dátheangach agus cruthaíonn sé sin gur féidir é a dhéanamh. Go minic níl an státhóras atá istigh anseo sásta dul sa treo sin. I dtíortha eile foilsítear agus déileáiltear leis an reachtaíocht go dátheangach. Ní tharlaíonn sé sin anseo. Aistrítear iad anseo nuair a bhíonn siad críochnaithe. Tá an job done, hard luck. Táimid críochnaithe leis.

Chomh maith leis sin tugadh gealladh domsa, measaim ón iar-Aire, an t-iar-Theachta Joan Burton, ag an am in 2011, go mbeadh na meamraim míniúcháin aistrithe agus ar fáil do gach duine, ní domsa amháin, mar tá Gaeilge líofa agam, ach tá daoine eile agus tá sé beagáinín níos deacra orthu na pointí atá á ndéanamh acu ar ábhair theicniúla a chur in iúl i nGaeilge mar níl an líofacht chéanna, an fhoclaíocht nó an stór focal acu. Bheadh sé i bhfad Éireann níos éasca dá mbeadh na meamraim míniúcháin curtha amach. Ní gá é a aistriú nó fiú a bheith foilsithe ar an lá ceannann céanna. Is é an t-aon rud is féidir a tharlú agus bheadh sé áisiúil nuair a bheadh dlús curtha timpeall deich focal nó mar sin ann agus go mbeadh sé sin úsáideach. Is rudaí simplí iad seo a chuideodh leis an mBille seo a thabharfadh deis dúinn déileáil le reachtaíocht as Gaeilge.

Tá samplaí eile ann, agus mar a dúirt mé níl mé ag caitheamh anuas ar dhaoine. Níl anseo ach samplaí. Tabharfaidh mé na ceannlínte don Teach agus roghnóidh mé roinnt díobh anseo: “Ardú 27% ar líon na ndíolúintí ón Gaeilge a bronnadh ar dhaltá sa séú bliain”, “Riachtanas Gaeilge ‘conspóideach agus ina údar aighnis’ a deir NUI”, “Teip na Roinne Oideachais maidir le Gaeilge ar shuíomh Ardteiste á scrúdú – i mBéarla amháin gur féidir le daltaí Ardteiste clárú dá scrúduithe ar shuíomh na Roinne Oideachais.” Níor tháinig leagan Gaeilge den suíomh sin ach tamaillín ina dhiaidh sin, is é sin an suíomh Ranna. Tá roinnt de shuíomhanna tubaisteach fós ó thaobh na Gaeilge de. Níor tháinig leagan Gaeilge den aip Covid-19 ach i ndiaidh an leagain Béarla. Tá rudaí mar sin ag tarlú. Níl an tús áite ag an nGaeilge. Mura bhfuil an leagan Gaeilge ar fáil níor cheart an leagan Béarla a fhoilsiú go dtí go bhfuil an leagan Gaeilge ar fáil. Níor chóir go mbeadh aon suíomh Stáit ag dul beo, mar a deir siad, sa lá atá inniu ann go dtí go mbeidh an leagan Gaeilge ann ag an am céanna. Is rudaí simplí iad sin.

Tá sé i gceist ag an mBille seo go mbeadh an Stát ag tabhairt seirbhísí as Gaeilge do lucht na Gaeltachta. Treisím leis sin. Tá sé sin á lorg againn sin le blianta. Is í an fhadhb atá ann ná nach bhfuil an oiread sin oifigeach Stáit ann anois mar tá mórán acu ar líne anois. Má tá duine ag tabhairt seirbhísí Gaeilge do lucht na Gaeltachta, beidh ar na daoine a mbíonn ag lorg an seirbhísí sin a bheith ar líne freisin. Má tá siad ar líne beidh siad ag gach duine. Níor chóir go mbeimid ag díriú isteach go díreach ar shuíomhanna fisiciúla sa Ghaeltacht ina bhfuil duine ina sheasamh ag deasc agus ag tabhairt seirbhíse. Nuair a líonann duine foirm anois is ar líne den chuid is mó atá neart daoine á dhéanamh sin. Má ghlaonn duine ar an Roinn Gnóthaí Fostaíochta agus Coimirce Sóisialaí gheofar duine ar an bhfón agus d’fhéadfadh an duine sin a bheith in Timbuktu agus beidh an tseirbhís ar fáil dó nó di agus an duine in ann cnaipe a bhrú. Tá sé i bhfad Éireann níos éasca dúinn mar Stát é sin a dhéanamh ná mar a bhí sé 20 nó 30 bliain ó shin nuair a bhí ar an duine a bheith ann go fisiciúil. Níor chóir go mbeadh sé deacair ar an Stát athrú a dhéanamh.

É sin ráite, tá fadhb bhunúsach aitheanta faoi láthair leis an gcóras ceapacháin, mar shampla, agus is é sin an fáth go bhfuilimid ag caint faoi earcú 20% de na daoine nua a bheidh sa Stát-seirbhís faoi 2030 a bheith líofa sa Ghaeilge. Faoi láthair déantar painéal a chumadh d’oifigigh feidhmiúcháin Gaeilge. Rinneadh ceann le déanaí agus leanfaidh sé go ceann 18 mí. Tá sé sin go maith ach luíonn sé le réasún go roghnófar duine ón bpainéal do gach cúigear folúntas atá ann agus is é an pointe sin atá i gceist againn. Níl sé chomh simplí sin mar go bhfuil sé ar bhonn iarratais ó Roinn éigin a roghnaítear duine ón bpainéal sin. Má tá dhá fholúntas ag Ro-

inn, ní bheidh an chuid is mó de na Ranna ag lorg duine le Gaeilge, níl siad ach ag lorg duine agus tá an chuid díobh ar phainéal eile. Tá fadhbanna bunúsacha ann agus beidh ar an gcoiste comhairliúcháin, ar an Aire agus ar an tSeirbhís um Cheapacháin Phoiblí déileáil leis na rudaí sin. Tuigim go bhfuil am ag teastáil chun an córas a athrú go himmheánach agus gur fadhbanna bunúsacha iad.

Ó thaobh an spriocdháta de, cad a tharlaíonn tar éis 2030? Ceapann daoine go mbeidh 20% den Státseirbhís in ann Gaeilge a labhairt nó go mbeidh siad líofa sa Ghaeilge faoi 2030. Ní hé sin atá ann. Níl ann ach go mbeidh 20% dóibh siúd a bheidh earcaithe as sin amach in ann Gaeilge a labhairt. I gceann 30 nó 40 bliain, beidh 20% den Státseirbhís in ann Gaeilge líofa a labhairt. Sin atá ann mar go minic bíonn daoine ann fad saoil.

Cad faoi 2035, 2040 nó 2050? Nach féidir linn sprioc eile a leagan amach go mbeidh 30% nó 40% ann agus sa deireadh go mbeidh 50% dóibh siúd atá sa Státseirbhís líofa sa Ghaeilge, seachas a bheith ag caint fúthu siúd a bheidh earcaithe? Sin athrú eile agus tá súil agam go mbeidh muid ag plé sin ó thaobh na leasuithe ar Chéim an Choiste.

Tagraím don choiste comhairleach. Tá sé seo spéisiúil agus níl a fhios agam cén fáth go bhfuil sé curtha sa slí atá sé. Tá a lán leasuithe le dul air sin. Níl ach duine amháin ón nGaeltacht ann agus níl na heagrais Gaeilge nó fiú na heagrais Stáit Gaeilge luaite le bheith ar an gcoiste gcomhairleach sin. Ba chóir dúinn roinnt acu a lua go sonrach agus b'fhéidir cathaoirleach neamhspleách ón Státchóras a cheapadh ar nós an Coimisinéir Teanga nó duine cosúil leis an bpríomhfheidhmeannach i bhFhoras na Gaeilge. Níl mé ag roghnú duine amháin nó duine eile ach tá mé ag rá go mba fiú dúinn féachaint ar conas gur féidir linn déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil téagar sa choiste comhairleach sin.

Tá rudaí eile ann nach bhfuil muid ag tabhairt fúthu i gceart sa Bhille seo, ceisteanna pleanála san áireamh. B'fhéidir nach é seo an áit cheart na ceisteanna seo a phlé ach má táimid ag déileáil leis seo, caithfear dualgais sa bhreis a bheith ar an Státchóras i gcoitinne maidir le déanamh cinnte de go mbeidh na caighdeáin phleanála teanga i gceart ansin.

Mar a dúirt mé, tacaím leis seo agus déanfaidh mé iarracht ar Chéim an Choiste leasuithe a chur síos a dhéanfaidh an Bille seo níos láidre. Ní haon caitheamh anuas ar dhaoine é sin. Seo atá ann ach táimid ag iarraidh go mbeidh sé i bhfad Éireann níos fearr agus go mbeidh muid in ann brath air chun cuidiú leis an obair chun an Ghaeilge a tharrtháil agus chun cur leis an nGaeltacht, seachas í a bheith ag meath an t-am ar fad.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis an Aire agus leis an Aire Stáit as ucht a bpoist nua. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil muid anseo inniu chun Bille nua ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla a phlé. Tá 17 bliana caite ó tugadh an tAcht féin isteach agus gealladh an Bille leasaithe seo sé bliana ó shin, nach mór. Ar a laghad, tá sé de sheans againn anois an Bille a scrúdú mar is cuí.

Ba léir nach raibh an Bille teanga a cuireadh os comhair Teachtaí i ndeireadh na bliana seo caite feiliúnach. Ar chuid de na laigí a tugadh aird orthu ag an am, bhí easpa spriocdháta don chuspóir go mbeadh líofacht sa Ghaeilge ag 20% d'oibrithe nua sa tseirbhís phoiblí; ní raibh spriocdháta ar bith maidir le seirbhísí poiblí i nGaeilge a chinntiú do mhuintir na Gaeltachta; ní raibh ionadaíocht ar bith ag saineolaithe ná ag pobal na Gaeilge ar an gcoiste comhairleach a bhí molta; agus gan dréachtchaighdeáin a bheith ar fáil mar eiseamláir do chóras na gcaighdeán teanga a thiocfadh isteach in áit na scéimeanna teanga.



Níl aon amhras ach gur chúis áthais a bhí ann domsa nuair a gealladh i gclár an Rialtais seo go ndéanfaí láidriú ar a raibh molta sa Bhille deireanach. Ar an ábhar sin, cuirim fáilte chroíúil roimh an leasú chun cumhachtaí breise a thabhairt don Choimisinéir Teanga sa chaoi is gur féidir leis faireachán a dhéanamh ar aon Acht a bhfuil baint aige le húsáid na Gaeilge nó lena stádas mar theanga oifigiúil. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go mbeadh sé de chead ag an gcoimisinéir tráchttaireacht a dhéanamh ar dlíthe eile, seachas Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla amháin. Easpa mhór sa Bhille a bhí ann ná nach raibh cead ag an gcoimisinéir ach iniúchadh a dhéanamh ar sheachaint dualgais nuair a ndéantar gearán agus táim an-sásta go bhfuil sé sin curtha ina cheart ag an Rialtas. Ina theannta sin, is céim eile chun cinn é go gcuirfidh na leasuithe spriocdháta den 31 Nollaig 2030 leis an gcuspóir sa Bhille go mbeadh 20% d'oibrithe nua sa tseirbhís phoiblí ina gcainteoirí Gaeilge. Is cur chuige tomhaiste ciallmhar é seo ach tá fadhbanna ann, mar a luaigh mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh.

Ní thuigim beag ná mór tuige a bhfuiltear ag moladh go mbeadh sé de chumhacht ag an Aire ordú a dhéanamh in 2028 go gcuirfí siar an spriocdháta sin. Mugadh magadh atá ann spriocdháta a leagan amach agus ag an am céanna a rá gur féidir é a shíneadh amach mura n-éireoidh leis. Ní luíonn sé le réasún agus creidim go láidir gur cheart an leasú sin a bhaint ón mBille. Ba chóir freisin go mbeadh sé ina dhualgas reachtúil ag duine nó dream ar leith maidir leis an bplean náisiúnta earcaíochta a chur i bhfeidhm.

Údar mór díomá eile atá sa Bhille seo ná nach bhfuil foráil láidir ann a leagfadh dualgas reachtúil ar chomhlachtaí poiblí freastal ar mhuintir na Gaeltachta ina dteanga dhúchais. Is minic atá sé ráite ach is tobar luachmhar teangeolaíoch iad na ceantair Ghaeltachta is láidre sa tír agus tá brú aisteach ar na pobail seo ar go leor bealaí. Níl na jabanna le fáil agus níl an infreastruchtúr gréasáin sásúil ar chor ar bith idir leathanbhanda, bóithre agus cuanta. Cuireann sé seo ar fad iallach ar mhuintir na Gaeltachta an baile a fhágáil ar thóir oibre agus is iondúil gur i mBéarla a bhíonn an obair sin ar fáil. Ar a dhroim sin, nuair a bhíonn muintir na Gaeltachta ag plé le seirbhísí an Stáit, bíonn orthu iompú ar an mBéarla go rímhinic chun a gcuid gnó a dhéanamh. Is í an teachtaireacht atá ann don chainteoir dúchais Ghaeilge, mar sin, go bhfuil sé go breá acu labhairt go príobháideach lena muintir nó le cairde i nGaeilge ach sa saol poiblí is é Béarla an teanga atá ann agus a bhéas in uachtar.

Mar atá ráite ag an sochtheangeolaí aitheanta, an Dr John Walsh, ní bheidh mórán údaráis i ndáiríre ag reachtaíocht teanga nach dtugann aghaidh ar na háiteanna ina bhfuil an Ghaeilge fós á labhairt mar theanga an phobail. Ba cheart go mbeadh an Stát ina eiseamláir maidir le soláthair seirbhísí Gaeilge ach ina ionad sin tá Bille os ár gcomhair nach ndéanann caint ar bith faoin éileamh bunúsach seo a chur ar fáil i nGaeilge agus gan cheist an chuirfeadh an Stát a chuid seirbhísí ar fáil sa Ghaeltacht ná tada ach an oiread faoin gceart níos bunúsaí fós a bheith ag duine ainm agus seoladh i nGaeilge a úsáid i gcúrsaí oifigiúla.

Tagraím don Choiste Comhairleach agus ba cheart go mbeadh ionchur ag sciar níos leithne de phobal na Gaeilge air sin, go háirithe saineolaithe teanga agus daoine ón bpobal a thui-geann go rímhaith cén tionchar a bhéas ag an reachtaíocht ar an bpobal. Tá sé ráite ag Conradh na Gaeilge gur cheart tuilleadh cumhachtaí a thabhairt don Choimisinéir Teanga chun go mbeadh cead aige Billí nua agus polasaithe Rialtais a scrúdú, faoi mar a dhéantar sa Bhreatain Bheag. Tagaim 100% leis an moladh seo. Is deis atá sa Bhille seo céimeanna móra chun cinn a ghlacadh maidir le seirbhísí Gaeilge a chur ar fáil don phobal agus chun cur le cumas an Stáit freastal mar is cóir ar mhuintir na Gaeltachta.

Cé go gcuirim fáilte roimh chuid de na leasuithe atá molta ag an Rialtas, is léir gur Bille

easnamhach atá ann go fóill agus go bhfuil easpa físe ag baint leis. Is é an cheist a bheadh agamsa don Rialtas ná cén toradh atá sé ag iarraidh ón mBille seo? Is éard a bheadh mise ag iarraidh uaidh ná go ndéanfaí éascaíocht do mhuintir na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta saol trí Ghaeilge a bheith acu sa tír seo. Más é sin a theastaíonn ón Aire, ón Aire Stáit agus ón Rialtas, chaithfí go dtuigeann siad gur chúis inní í an treocht reatha i leith úsáid na Gaeilge sna pobail Gaeltachta ina bhfuil sí fós beo mar theanga phobail. Ní bheifear in ann an méid seo a iompú ar ais de cheal polasaithe láidir a dhéanfaidh an Ghaeilge a shní isteach i chuile chuid den saol. Sin é an dúshlán atá romhainn agus is ar an mbonn sin a impím ar an Aire agus ar an Aire Stáit breathnú an athuair ar an reachtaíocht seo, na leasuithe cuí a choinneáil agus a láidriú agus ansin na leasuithe gan chiall atá luaite agam a fhágáil amach ar fad sula dtabharfaí an Bille isteach.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** The Labour Party welcomes this Bill. It has been ten months since it was published and it has been a very peculiar legislative period. The Minister has brought this forward as soon as feasibly possible and this is appreciated. The Labour Party will look to bring some amendments to the Bill to strengthen it, but overall it is a move in the right direction and we broadly support it.

I will, however, flag some of the issues here that we will be raising. An Post should not be able to avoid obligations of section 9 of the current Act with regard to marketing materials made available to the public because their duties under the Official Languages Act 2003 were not made sufficiently clear. If a public body or a Government Department contacts the public in any way that contact should be made bilingually or in Irish only, and current exceptions should not be allowed. There should be a requirement for a specific level of advertising to be included in the Bill. It has been made abundantly clear that during the Covid crisis there was very little, almost zero, Irish or bilingual advertising from the HSE and the Government. I spent a few days in the Gaeltacht during the summer and the vast majority of HSE signs were in English. It was very visible. Warnings on alcoholic drinks should be bilingual as well, as they are in other bilingual countries. That could be included in this Bill.

There is a broader issue involved with the promotion of the Irish language, which this Bill falls under. I will use this opportunity to speak about what the Minister of State and the Government can do before next week's budget, and then beyond, to promote the Irish language, in particular to young people. I am sure the Minister of State is familiar with Raidió Rí-Rá, which is an Irish-language music station aimed at 12 to 30-year olds. It broadcasts online and via its app and has studios in Dublin, Cork and Galway. It is seeking an FM licence. There is no concern regarding the frequency; it just wants the opportunity to be able to broadcast to the 32 counties. Raidió Rí-Rá is a unique offering. It is a vibrant radio station operated by young people for young people. It plays exactly the same music and content as any radio station broadcasting in English, whether that is FM104, Spin 103 in Dublin, or stations anywhere else around the country. The one defining and distinct selling point of Raidió Rí-Rá, however, is that it broadcasts in Irish. The costs associated with the request are not insignificant but, that said, they are not too high. I am sure a briefing has been sent to the Minister of State's office on this issue. This could have benefits for the language, and particularly for promoting it to young people. Those benefits would be manifest compared with the money required to support it.

I am someone who is constantly trying to relearn Irish. At the moment, I have CDs in my car, which I bought about six months ago to try to bone up on my Irish. It is not working for me, but I am trying all the time. A station like Raidió Rí-Rá would benefit people like me, who went through our education system for 14 years and still does not have the confidence or competence to speak as Gaeilge in our national Parliament. We need to look at other ways of promoting the

language outside the education system.

We look forward to engaging with the Minister and Minister of State on this Bill as it goes through Committee Stage and into the Seanad. We welcome this debate and thank the Minister and Minister of State.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** D'oscail Coláiste Eoghain Uí Chomhraíde i gCarraig an Chabhailtaigh i gContae an Chláir mar choláiste samhraidh don Ghaeilge sa bhliain 1908, ach bhí ar lucht bainistíochta an choláiste é a dhúnadh dhá bhliain ó shin mar thoradh ar easpa maoinithe. I mí an Mhárta na bliana seo, rinne bord bainistíochta an choláiste iarracht airgead a fháil ón gciste um athghiniúint agus forbairt tuaithe, ach theip orthu. Déanfaidh baill an bhoird iarracht nua an mhí seo chugainn agus tá súil agam go ndéanfaidh an tAire a dícheall chun an tacaíocht fiorthábhachtach seo a thabhairt dóibh. Tá sé mar phlean acu, agus iad ag dul ar aghaidh, an coláiste a úsáid le haghaidh ranganna Gaeilge mar is gnách i rith an tsamhraidh agus mar shuíomh fiontraíochta agus turasóireachta i rith na míonna eile. Níor dhún Coláiste Eoghain Uí Chomhraíde ach uair amháin thar na blianta, agus b'shin nuair a dhóigh na Dúchrónaigh an foirgneamh. Tá súil agam go láidir go gcaibróidh an tAire leis an gcoláiste seo.

I speak about Coláiste Eoghain Uí Chomhraíde in Carrigaholt in County Clare. It was founded as an Irish college by Conradh na Gaeilge way back in 1908, and during its many years of existence it only had to close once. That was in 1920, when the building was partially burnt by the Black and Tans. To the immense dismay of local people in west Clare and the Irish language movement across the county, Coláiste Eoghain Uí Chomhraíde had to close its doors once again in 2018. This time, it closed due to a lack of funding, which has been the enemy of so many organisations.

In March this year, Coláiste Eoghain Uí Chomhraíde applied for rural regeneration and redevelopment funding, but its application was unsuccessful. It is planned to make a second application for funding next month and I hope the Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht will make the effort possible to support that case. The plan for the future of the coláiste is a realistic and sensible one. Management envisages the coláiste operating as an Irish college, as normal, in June, July and August. For the remainder of the year, it would operate as a centre in west Clare to be used interchangeably for enterprise and tourism activities. It even has the potential to be a three-star hostel providing accommodation in the extremities of west Clare.

There are, therefore, many new uses for the coláiste beyond what was initially conceived in 1908. Funding for the Irish college in Carrigaholt is not just about protecting our native language. It is also about jobs and the rural economy in west Clare. I ask that the Minister of State do his very best for Coláiste Eoghain Uí Chomhraíde.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire. Tá a fhios agam go dtagann sí as Carraig Mhachaire Rois i gContae Mhuineacháin. Dúirt mo sheanmháthair liom go raibh Gaeltacht nó breac-Ghaeltacht i nDomhnach Maighean sa chontae sin nuair a bhí sí ina cailín óg. Tá súil agam go bhfuil cúis na teanga go smior i ndearcadh an Aire.

Do bhuaileas an tseachtain seo caite le Breannán Ó Beaglaoich ó Bhaile na bPoc i gCorca Dhuibhne agus bhíomar ag plé cúrsaí teanga. Aontaím leis gur chóir go mbeadh pobal na Gaeltachta in ann cónaí lena gcomharsain sa Ghaeltacht. Tá polasaithe an Stáit dírithe ar dhaoine a bhrú isteach sna cathracha, nó sna bailte is cóngaraí dóibh ar nós An Daingean, cé go dtéann

sé seo glan in aghaidh traidisiún agus meon pobal na tuaithe. Má táthar chun pobal sláintiúil a choimeád faoin tuath, caithfear tacaíocht a thabhairt dóibh agus is é an ceart is bunúsaí ar fad ná an ceart atá ag gach duine maireachtaint ina cheantar dúchais. Mar atá ráite ag Breannbán Ó Beaglaoich, muna gcuirtear ina cheart an córas atá ann faoi láthair, beidh ár mhuintir a chuaigh romhainn, a d'fhág ár mbailte beaga againn mar oidhreacht, maslaithe againn agus ní mhaithfidh na glúnta atá le teacht é go deo. Ba chóir aitheantas faoi leith a thabhairt don gcainteoir dúchais atá ag iarraidh maireachtaint ina cheantar féin. Ba chóir go mbeadh Gaelainn líofa ag na pleanálaithe a bhíonn ag plé le muintir na Gaeltachta.

Is sórt saoránach den dara grád é an teanga. Nuair a bhím ag tiomáint ar ais go dtí Contae Chiarraí, feicim an leagan Gaeilge scríofa níos lú ar comharthaí bóithre, cleachtas a bhriseann na rialacha a deir gur chóir an leagan Gaeilge a úsáid nuair atá na logainmneacha cosúil lena chéile i mBéarla agus i nGaeilge, áiteanna cosúil le Úlla i gContae Luimnigh, Muine Gall i gContae Uíbh Fhailí agus Mín Liatroma i gContae Chiarraí. Go dtí seo, ní rabhthas in ann m'ainm Gaeilge a úsáid agus mé ag déileáil le seirbhísí pobail. Fós níl daoine ábalta síneadh fada a úsáid agus iad ag déanamh áirithintí le Aer Lingus.

Is é seo an Bille is tábhachtaí don Ghaeilge le blianta. Aontaím le sprioc an Bhille maidir le postanna sa tseirbhís poiblí. B'fhéidir go gcabhróidh sé le fostaíocht a chruthú. Aontaím freisin leis na moltaí atá curtha chun cinn ag Conradh na Gaeilge, an Coimisinéir Teanga agus pobal na Gaeilge i gcoitinne. Ba cheart don Rialtas dréachtchaighdeán teanga a fhoilsiú sula dtagann an reachtaíocht seo ar ais os comhair na Dála, agus na leasuithe atá i gceist acu a dhéanamh ar an mBille a chur in iúl dúinn. Gan na gníomhacha seo ó thaobh an Rialtais, beidh sé deacair tacú leis an mBille ar an Dara Céim. Má dhéanann an Rialtas na rudaí seo roimh ré, b'fhéidir go mbeimid in ann tacaíocht a thabhairt don reachtaíocht ar an Dara Céim sa tsúil go ndéanfar na leasuithe cuí ar Chéim an Choiste.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I begin by apologising for not making my contribution in the language that we are gathered here to protect. It is an issue of which I am conscious, and I have committed to improving my Irish language ability. It will be a great honour to be able to stand up in this House and address Ministers with more confidence. I will be doing that in the weeks and months ahead.

I am going to speak about the Bill and comment on some potential issues, topics and concerns that have been raised by members of the Irish language community, with whom I have engaged, and the Social Democrats' WhatsApp group as Gaeilge, which has welcomed me into its forum in recent days. I also hope to raise various issues when we discuss amendments on Committee Stage.

It is great that 2030 has been set as the target date for increasing to 20% the proportion of recruits who are competent in Irish. The provision for a review in 2028 and the power being given to the Minister to extend the deadline beyond 2030 will have to be examined and it is likely these provisions will need to be amended.

The Minister with direct responsibility should not be able to give him or herself an extension. It should absolutely be the Dáil or an independent person or body that takes the decision.

As with the Welsh Language Commissioner and the Ombudsman for Children in Ireland, the Coimisinéir Teanga should examine all proposed legislation relating to the Irish language and any public strategy relating to the promotion of the official language, that is, the 20-year

strategy for the Irish language. Further duties for the Coimisinéir Teanga need to be included in the Bill such as, for example, giving the Coimisinéir Teanga a role in examining Government Bills and policies and in making observations regarding the Irish language and Gaeltacht matters, which may head off any problems arising after the enactment of legislation or Government policy. This proposed role for the Coimisinéir Teanga reflects a similar duty to that of the Welsh Language Commissioner in Wales.

All functions delegated by public bodies in contracts to other bodies should automatically come within the ambit of the legislation, including the Dublinbikes scheme, the Go-Ahead bus services etc. The comparison that was made to me when I spoke to the Irish language community was with Irish Water. I do not know anybody who refers to it as Uisce Éireann. The idea of having a sole body's name be in the Irish language is important. Bodies such as An Post should not be able to avoid the obligations of section 9 of the current Act regarding marketing materials made available to the public because their duties under the Official Languages Act 2003 were not sufficiently clear. If a public body or Department contacts the public in any way, that contact should be made bilingually or in Irish only and current exceptions should not be allowed.

A requirement for a specific level of advertising should be included in the Bill. Deputy Duncan Smith has already raised the issue of the Covid restrictions, guidelines and warnings only appearing in the English language. It is a particular source of annoyance to the Irish language community and is something that we need to address, possibly as a matter of urgency as the pandemic continues. Anyone working in the Civil Service should have the same right to do their business with the State through Irish. For example, the promotions process, the staff assessment process, internal correspondence for staff and so on should be made available in Irish for the Civil Service. Employees should not be prohibited from using Irish in the workplace for no good reason. This is an example of effective language planning in the wrong direction which needs to be banned if we are to increase the use of Irish in society. Some issues have been raised with me about people in the hospitality industry who were reprimanded for use of the Irish language when engaging with customers, back when we had a hospitality industry. That needs to be protected and enhanced, and anybody who engages with the language in their place of work should be protected.

The commissioner and the public should be given a role relating to the enactment of the legislation, in line with the injunction mechanism under the planning Acts, given the strong public dimension relating to language legislation. In the event that a public body refuses to comply with any provision of this Bill in accordance with any provision or regulations made pursuant to this Bill, the High Court may, at the request of the commissioner or any other person, whether or not that person has a particular interest in such default or refusal, require any public body, by order, to do anything in accordance with any provision of this legislation or in accordance with any provision in regulations made pursuant to the legislation, which is not, in the opinion of the court, necessary and specified in the order.

As was already raised, the warning on alcoholic drinks should be given bilingually, as it is in other bilingual countries. When this issue was raised in the past, it was noted that this may be in contravention to a European directive. This would not actually be the case. If one looks at cigarette packaging where the warnings are bilingual, those act as a template of how we could move this forward.

As it is ensured that women and men are well-represented on State boards, there should certainly also be representation for Irish speakers on such boards.



Irish should have equal status with English on Ireland's road signs. This is done in Wales, Scotland and in other countries with more than one official language. The current Tánaiste, when he was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, supported the recommendation. No one is talking about changing the signs overnight, only as they need to be renewed or as new ones need to be supplied. It should be taken into account that research conducted by Conradh na Gaeilge, with a report prepared by the expert, Garrett Reil, shows that the current road signage system is defective and dangerous, especially as drivers get older. This presents an opportunity to change it and make it bilingual.

Section 18B, which is inserted to the principal Act by section 6, on the Irish language services advisory committee, advises that only member is to be nominated by the Minister as a representative of a Gaeltacht area, yet the rest will represent Departments. In my opinion and the opinion of those with whom I have engaged in this regard, this proposal acts as tokenism, even by typical Irish language community expectations, and to have it at the bottom of the list shows the communities that this consideration and planning is as if it is a task that needs to be done for its own sake and not for the benefit of any community or people. Instead, there should be clear representation from at least three of the main Gaeltacht areas, including Donegal, Galway and Kerry, for example, and at least one of the four urban Gaeltacht and emerging communities. I specifically refer to Clondalkin, which has done incredible work to promote its Gaeltacht in recent years.

With regard to Gaeltacht service towns and Irish language networks, this Bill, despite its amendments, is too passive. It places little or no obligation or incentive on public bodies to improve their capacity for bilingual services unless they happen to be in already vulnerable Gaeltacht zones. To boost the language, these service towns must be encouraged further to become bilingual for the nearby Gaeltacht communities and local second language communities.

The proposed new section 19C is a derogation from language standards. It is open to abuse from bodies which may not wish to engage with any new language standards and seek instead to opt out through whichever excuse they may find. There is an equal suspicion being shared with regard to the amendment of section 12 of the Juries Act 1976, which removes references to both languages and court summonses. A question was asked about why that is being done but Deputy Chambers addressed that in his contribution. I look forward to seeing that be catered for.

I will leave my contribution there and look forward to engaging with the process as it continues.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** Uaireanta, is iad na rudaí beaga a chuireann isteach ort mar Ghael - nuair a fhiafraíonn daoine “What is that name in English?”, mar shampla. B’fhéidir gur ceist saonta, gan dochar í, ach tar éis tamaill, cuireann sí isteach ort. Is sampla eile é an síneadh fada. Níl an Ghaeilge neamhchoitianta i dteangacha sa tslí ina bhfuil diacritics aici - tá an umlaut ag na Gearmánaigh, an cédille sa Fhraincis, ach fáth éigin, tá an síneadh fada deacair dúinn anseo in Éirinn. Go dtí le déanaí, ní raibh Iarnród Éireann in ann é a úsáid ar shuíocháin réamháirithe, ach tá an cás sin réitithe anois. Uaireanta, is iad na rudaí níos mó a chuireann isteach ort, mar nuair a bhíonn duine ag iarraidh maireachtáil trí mheán na Gaeilge, agus níl sé nó sí in ann seirbhísí, fiú seirbhísí an Stáit, a fháil trí Ghaeilge, chéad teanga oifigiúil an Stáit de réir an Bhunreacht. Téann sé sin go mór i bhfeidhm ar phobal na Gaeilge.

Is iarracht é an Bille seo chun cuid de na fadhbanna sin, beag nó mór, a réiteach agus Acht

na dTeangacha Oifigiúla a neartú. Cuirim fáilte roimh na leasuithe atá idir lámha againn anseo. Ceann de na gnéithe is tábhachtaí anseo ná go bhfuil níos mó fiacla ag an mBille seo ná mar a bhí cheana. Cáineadh an Bille a tháinig os comhair na Dála anuraidh de bharr nach raibh spriocdhátaí ag a lán de na cuspóirí a bhí luaite ann. Is maith an rud é go luaitear 2030 mar spriocdháta do 20% d'earcaíocht na Státseirbhíse a bheith do phoist Gaeilge. Tá inní orm go fóill toisc go bhfuil saghas get out clause fágtha sa téacs a thugann cumhacht athbhreithnithe don Aire sa bhliain 2028, ach is tús maith é seo agus tá súil agam go mbeidh uaillmhian ag an Roinn an sprioc seo a bhaint amach. Cuirim fáilte freisin roimh an leasú a thugann níos mó cumhachta don Choimisinéir Teanga iniúchadh a dhéanamh ar a thoil féin.

Is deas an rud é go gcuirfear seirbhísí Stáit ar fáil sa Ghaeltacht i nGaeilge, gan cheist agus gan choinne. Ba chóir an coiste comhairliúcháin a chuir le chéile chomh luath agus is féidir chun plean a reáchtáil maidir le conas a bhainfear é sin amach trí sheirbhísí Gaeilge a fheabhsú agus a mhéadú. Ba bhreá liom freisin go ndéanfar infheistíocht sna bailte seirbhísí Gaeilge, mar Dhún Garbhán, a fhreastalaíonn ar Ghaeltacht na nDéise i bPort Láirge. Tá iarratas amháin agam maidir le déantús an chomhchoiste. Iarraim ar an Aire cinntiú go mbeidh ionadaíocht ag pobal na Gaeilge ar an gcoiste sin.

Tá gach baol ann agus muid ag caint faoin nGaeilge go dtitfimid isteach sa ghaiste díospóireachta sin ina dtailimid í a thuiscint trí phríosma ár gcóras eacnamaíochta. Aithníonn an córas sin praghas, b'fhéidir, agus brabús cinnte, ach an aithníonn sé luach rud? Tá sé sinn neamhchinnte. Tá a fhios againn mar Ghlasaigh go bhfuil difríocht idir praghas agus luach. Tá fiúntas faoi leith ag baint, mar shampla, leis an mbithéagsúlacht thar aon mheasúnú eacnamaíochta. Tá sé sin mar an gcéanna le teangacha, agus an Ghaeilge ina measc. Is lionsa í gach teanga, cruthaithe ag cultúr daoine na háite sin, a bhíonn mór-thionchar aici ar ár radharc ar an domhan atá mórthimpeall orainn. Is linne an Ghaolainn agus is í ár bhfuinneog ar an saol.

Labhair mé le déanaí anseo sa Dáil faoin moladh a rinne an tUachtarán Micheál D. Ó hUigín agus é ag tabhairt óráid don Tom Johnson Summer School leath scór bliain ó shin. An chomhairle a bhí aige ná go gcaithfidh fíis útóipeach a chur romhainn mar sprioc agus oibriú ansin ar a son. Chomh maith le haon tuiscint eacnamaíochta a bhaineann leis an moladh sin, déarfainn féin mar Ghlasaigh go gcaithfidh aon mhachnamh ar an ábhar seo sláinte na timpeallachta a thabhairt isteach. Déarfainn freisin mar Ghael go bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar chuid lárnach d'aon fhís útóipeach a bheadh agam don tír seo. Más sin an sprioc atá os ár gcomhair amach, ní mór dúinn oibriú go tréan chun an sprioc sin a bhaint amach.

Is iad an grúpa is tábhachtaí do thodhchaí na Gaeilge na daoine a bhfuil stair na teanga iontu freisin, sin iad, muintir na Gaeltachta. Tá brú uafásach ar ár gceantair Ghaeltachta faoi láthair ó thaobh fostaíochta, tithíochta agus cinnte ó thaobh na teanga í féin. Aithnítear go bhfuil géarchéim teanga sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Tá obair den scoth á dhéanamh ag Foras na Gaeilge agus ag Údarás na Gaeltachta go háirithe chun infheistíocht agus fhostaíocht a mhealladh go dtí na dúichí, ach tá i bhfad níos mó tacaíochta ag teastáil ón Rialtas. Lárnach san obair sin ná na coinníollacha teanga cearta a chur i bhfeidhm sna ceantair Ghaeltachta le bheith cinnte, agus tithíocht á fhorbairt againn, go bhfuilimid ag freastal ar na riachtanais sa phobal, ach gan an Ghaeilge a scriosadh nó a chaolú mar theanga i mbéal na ndaoine ann.

Is iad an dara grúpa is tábhachtaí ná dream na Gaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht, daoine a bhfuil caighdeán ard Gaeilge acu agus gur mhaith leo maireachtáil trí mheán na Gaeilge, ní amháin sa Ghaeltacht ach ar fud na tíre. Tá sárobair déanta ag ár n-urlabhraí Gaeilge Peter Kavanagh agus a chairde leis an bhfeachtas Pop-up Gaeltacht, ach caithfear seirbhísí an Stáit a

chur ar fáil go forleathan as Gaeilge chun freastal ar an bpobal sin. Má táimid ag iarraidh líon na ndaoine atá ag úsáid an Ghaeilge mar a ngnáth teanga laethúil a mhéadú, is as an gcóhórt seo a thiocfaidh siad.

Deirtear gur tús maith leath na hoibre. Bhuel, caithfidh mé an obair atá sa Bhille seo a mholadh, agus an tAire, an tAire Stáit agus an Roinn, a mholadh as ucht an obair atá déanta anseo. Níl ann ach tús ar an méid atá le déanamh chun an ghéarchéim teanga a leigheas, ach tugann sé leid agus misneach do lucht na Gaeilge go bhfuil fíis agus uaillmhian ag an Roinn dul chun cinn fiúntach a dhéanamh sa tréimhse Rialtais atá romhainn. Ní ach tús é, ach tús maith. Molaim an Bille seo.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Níl agam ach tréimhse ghairid. Táimid ag déileáil leis an mBille seo 17 bliain ar aghaidh ón Acht agus an scéim a bhí ann ó thaobh na scéimeanna teanga. Bhí sé i gceist go mbeadh a scéim féin ag gach eagraíocht pobal. Go minic, cuireadh scéim amháin ar fáil, d'éag sé, bhí sé imithe agus ansin níor tháinig aon rud ina dhiaidh. Cé go raibh an fealsúnacht dhearfach agus bheadh solúbthacht ann do na heagrais faoi leith, is léir nár oibrigh sé in ainneoin go raibh an dearcadh agus na haidhmeanna ceart ann. Tá an cur chuige anseo an-difriúil. Táimid ag caint faoi chur chuige mórthimpeall an Státseirbhís agus na heagraíochtaí pobal go léir. Cé go bhfuil gnéithe dearfacha sa Bhille, tá sé tábhachtach agus is fadhb é, mar atá sé ráite ag daoine cheana féin, nach bhfuil dátaí againn do na spriocanna seo. Caithfear nach bhfuil siad mar aspiration, gur féidir iad a bhaint amach agus go mbeidh cur chuige agus tiomáint ann i dtreo iad a bhaint amach. Ba chóir go mbeadh spriocdhátaí ann ó thaobh na seirbhísí Stáit a chur ar fáil trí Ghaeilge sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Tá sé sin an-tábhachtach.

Níl samplaí againn de na dréacht-chaighdeáin a bheidh ag teastáil do chóras na scéimeanna teanga agus tá sé sin tábhachtach freisin. I gcoitinne, nuair a labhraímid faoin nGaeilge deir daoine go bhfuil ábhar imní agus ábhar dóchais ann. Níl sé chomh simplí le rá go bhfuil an Ghaeilge ag fáil bháis ach níl sí ag borradh ach an oiread. Tá an Ghaeilge inár gcathracha agus tá an-ábhar dóchais ansin. Feicimid na deiseanna atá á cruthú tríd eagraíochtaí ar nós na Gaeil Óga agus Laochra Loch Lao, na Pop-up Gaeltachtaí agus mar sin de. Caithfidh an Roinn tacú leo sin agus tá ról ag an mBille seo tacú leis na deiseanna cainte do dhaoine a thagann amach as na Gaelscoileanna nach cainteoirí dúchais iad. Caithfear na deiseanna sin a thabhairt dóibh agus tá sé sin tábhachtach mar i go leor slite ní bhíonn na deiseanna acu cé go mbíonn an fonn orthu an teanga a labhairt. Tá an fonn acu ach ní bhíonn an deis acu ina ngnáth saoil.

Is léir go bhfuil an-fhadhb againn sa Ghaeltacht agus ní rud beag é sin ar chor ar bith. Is í an Ghaeltacht an áit atá ina bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar an teanga labhartha. Tá saibhreas na teanga ansin agus is saghas tobar í don teanga ar fud an Stáit. Tá sé tábhachtach go dtuigimid díreach conas tacú leis na pobail sin agus déanadh cinnte go bhfuil Gaeilge ag na daoine atá ag lonnú ann nó go bhfuil siad chun í a fhoghlaim agus a labhairt agus gur féidir leo seirbhísí Stáit a bhaint amach.

Teastaíonn spriocdhátaí agus níos mó sonraí ó thaobh conas go gcuirtear forálacha na reachtaíochta i bhfeidhm. Tá sé sin tábhachtach chun feabhas a chur ar an mBille seo. Cé go raibh aidhm mhaith ag an mBille 2003, is léir nár oibrigh sé mar a bhí á súil leis. Tá súil agam go n-éiríonn níos fearr leis an mBille seo ach caithfidh sé a bheith níos láidre agus níos daingne.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Ar dtús, déarfadh mé cúpla focal as Béarla. As I have the opportunity, I wish to raise an issue unrelated to this Bill with the Minister and the Minister of State. I

refer to the lack of a Gaelscoil in the postal districts of Dublin 10 and 12. I acknowledge that this is a matter for the Department of Education and Skills but support from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht would help progress the achievement of some educational facilities in these very big postal districts which include areas like Ballyfermot, Cherry Orchard, Walkinstown, Drimnagh, Crumlin. Tá siad gan aon Ghaelscoil – not a meánscoil or a bunscoil in any of those areas. We managed to get a naíonra in Ballyfermot with the help of our local councillor Hazel De Nortúin over the last few years but there is a need for a Gaelscoil in these big working class areas, and there is a very deep desire among parents and young people to learn and become prolific in their own language. There is a grá for it and an absolute need for it. We will be leaning on the Minister for her support in campaigning for a Gaelscoil in both Dublin 10 and Dublin 12.

Maidir leis an mBille, mar a dúirt Teachtaí Dála eile, molaim go leagtar amach spriocdháta cinnte le go mbeadh 20% de dhaoine nua a thagann isteach sa Státchóras in ann a ngnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge. Má mholann an Rialtas an bhliain 2030 mar spriocdháta, ba chóir go mbeadh spriocanna gearrthéarmach socraithe freisin agus go ndéantar athbhreithniú gach dara bliain chun cinntiú go bhfuil na spriocanna á baint amach. Is gá go dtéann grúpa neamhspleách i mbun na hathbhreithnithe seo. Cuirim fáilte roimh an gcoiste comhairleach atá molta chun faire ar earcaíocht don Státchóras. Tá locht mór ag baint leis an leagan amach atá molta ag an Rialtas, áfach. Níl aon ról luaite ann d'ionadaithe ó phobal na Gaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht agus ní bheidh guth acu ar an gcoiste seo. Tá sé sin mícheart agus níl an dea-chleachtas céanna i gceist anseo a bhaineann le réimsí eile sa saol. Mar shampla, ní bheadh an Teach seo sásta fóram a bhunú do dhaoine faoi mhíchumas gan ionadaí a bheith ann ón earnáil sin. Molaim ionadaí a bheith ar an gcoiste seo ó ghrúpa stocaireachta Gaeilge. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go mbeadh gach seirbhís a chuireann an Stát ar fáil do phobal na Gaeltachta ar fáil trí Ghaeilge. Is gá spriocdháta cinnte a luaigh dó sin mar chuid den Bhille seo freisin. Ba chóir go mbeadh na seirbhísí Stáit curtha ar fáil sa Ghaeltacht féin agus mura bhfuil fós, ba chóir go mbeadh na seirbhísí féin curtha ar fáil trí Ghaeilge. Mura dtarlaíonn sé seo, ciallaíonn sé go bhfuil Dáil Éireann ag rá le pobal na Gaeltachta nach bhfuil tábhacht leis an teanga.

Molaim go mbeadh sa Bhille breis cumhachtaí tugtha don Choimisinéir Teanga ionas go mbeadh sé nó sí in ann réamh-scrúdú a dhéanamh ar aon reachtaíocht nua chun a chinntiú nach ndéanann sé dochar don Ghaeilge nó don Ghaeltacht. Bheidh an méid seo ag teacht leis an dea-chleachtas idirnáisiúnta.

Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt do gach éinne a dhein obair chrua ar an mBille tábhachtach seo.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille agus déanaim comhghairdeas leis na hAirí agus a gcuid oifigigh as an obair atá déanta acu le cúpla mí anuas. Bhíomar ag caint air seo sna cainteanna a bhí ann chun Rialtas a chur le chéile i lár na Bealtaine. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an gCathaoirleach freisin agus leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle as an obair a bhí déanta ag coiste na Gaeilge, mo chomhghleacaí an Teachta Eamon Ó Cuív san áireamh, chun rudaí níos láidre a chur sa Bhille. Tá a fhios agam nach raibh turas éasca acu go dtí seo, ach táimid anseo anois agus tá Bille láidir againn. Tar éis an phróisis seo, b'fhéidir go mbeidh muid in ann é a dhéanamh níos láidre.

Cath amú a mbeadh ann muna ndéantar aon difríocht do mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus do dhaoine a bhfuil Gaeilge acu ó thaobh seirbhísí de. Tá deiseanna sa Bhille chun an Ghaeilge a dhéanamh níos láidre agus chun bunús níos láidre a bheith ann don Ghaeilge i ngach chuid den

tír. Am amú a mbeidh san obair atá déanta go dtí seo thar na mblianta muna ndéantar iarracht i bhfad níos mó sa Teach seo.

Agus lá na cáinainéise ag teacht, ní bheidh mórán Gaeilge á úsáid agus Airí ag tabhairt a gcuid óráidí. Ba cheart, ar a leithéid de lá, agus nuair a mbíonn taoisigh ag tabhairt óráid don Stáit, go mbeadh an Ghaeilge in úsáid i bhfad níos mó ná mar a dtarlaíonn anois. Léireoidh sé do mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus do dhaoine a bhaineann úsáid as an nGaeilge, go bhfuil tábhacht ag baint leis an teanga. Molaim an teanga a úsáid.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an 20% ach tá sé tábhachtach iarracht a dhéanamh chomh luath agus is féidir agus go mbeidh na seirbhísí ann, ní hamháin sa Ghaeltacht – tuigean gach duine an méid sin – ach sna ceantair ina bhfuil daoine ag baint úsáid as an nGaeilge. Bhí mé ag éisteacht leis an Teachta Ó Cathasaigh. Tá mé ag caint faoi cheantair cosúil le Cluain Dolcáin, áit ina bhfuil an Comhairleoir Peter Kavanagh as déanamh sár-iarracht, agus ceantair cosúil leis sin sna cathracha, ceantar an Chathaoirligh ina measc. Ní Gaeltacht iad, ach tá a lán daoine le Gaeilge ach seans í a úsáid.

Agus muid ag déanamh roll-out ar an mBille seo, ba cheart dúinn brú a chur ar sheirbhísí cosúil leis An Post, An Roinn Gnóthaí Fostaíochta agus Coimirce Sóisialaí agus An Roinn Oideachas agus Scileanna ionas go mbeidh daoine i ngach ceantar sa tír, ní hamháin sa Ghaeltacht, ag iarraidh an Ghaeilge a úsáid. Ba cheart go mbeidh cuidiú ar fáil do dhaoine, go mbeidh notices i ngach oifig sa tír á rá go bhfuil Gaeilge á úsáid chun a rá le daoine go bhfuilimid ag déanamh an méid seo le chéile. Tá sé tábhacht a léiriú ní hamháin go bhfuil Bille ann, ach go bhfuil suim ann freisin.

Maidir le pleananna Gaeilge, tá sé soiléir go gcaithimid suigh síos leis na pleanálaí i ngach chuid den tír atá ag déileáil leis an pleananna. B'fhéidir go mbeidh sé úsáideach chun a fháil amach cad atá ag obair agus cad nach bhfuil ag obair sna pleananna. Tá na pleananna antábhachtach, agus bunúsach chun an teanga a shábháil. Ach tuigim agus tugaim faoi dheara nach bhfuil buy-in sa phobail in a lán ceantar. I gceantar amháin, sean-Ghaeltacht, bhí plean á ullmhú ach bhí tuismitheoirí sa mheán scoil ag rá nach raibh suim ag na tuismitheoirí an Ghaeilge a úsáid. Gaeltacht oifigiúil a bhí ann, mar dhe, ach bhí siad ag tabhairt teachtaireacht don phróiseas pleanála.

Beidh sé úsáideach a fháil amach cad atá ag obair sa phróiseas. An bhfuilimid ag baint úsáid as na méain shóisialta chun cuidiú leis an bpróiseas agus chun a rá le daoine nach bhfuil aon rud chun a bheith buartha faoi maidir leis an nGaeilge a úsáid agus a spreagadh i ngach ceantar. Tá sé tábhacht go mbeadh acmhainní breise ar fáil don phróiseas sin.

Beidh an cáinainéis ar an Máirt agus bhí feachtas difriúil ann ó thaobh a bheith ar líne, ach tá an teachtaireacht cheánna ann, go gcaithfidimid airgead sa bhreis a thabhairt do na cumainn Ghaeilge atá ag obair ar son na Gaeilge ionas go mbeidh siad in ann an obair sin a dhéanamh. Mar an gcéanna leis na comharchumainn sna Gaeltachtaí agus iad siúd atá ar na hoileáin, atá ag déanamh sár-iarracht chun seirbhísí a chur ar fáil trí Ghaeilge, seirbhísí atá luaite sa Bhille.

Tá fadhb tuisceanna nó fadhb de shaghas éigean maidir le cúrsaí pleanála. Bhí mé ag plé seo leis an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Jack Chambers. Tá sé soiléir i Rath Cairn agus i Daingean Uí Chúise go bhfuil fadhb ann. Tar éis na cáinainéise, caithfidimid suigh síos leis an Aire Tithíochta, Pleanála agus Rialtais Áitiúil chun é sin a phlé.

Tá TG4, TnaG agus Raidió na Life ag déanamh an-jab. Caithfidimid a bheith bródúil as an



méid atá ag tarlú ag TG4 agus an caighdeán atá ar fáil ann. Caithfidh cuidiú le TG4 as an obair tábhacht atá á dhéanamh ann.

Gabhaim buíochas agus comhghairdeas leis na hAirí. Mar a dúirt an Teachta Ó Cathasaigh, tús maith leath na hoibre. Táimid anseo chun cuidiú leo. Tá sé tábhachtach a bheith ag obair le chéile. Tá obair mór le déanamh.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Tá an Teachta Tóibín ag roinnt a chuid ama leis an Teachta Shanahan.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Tá meas agam ar an Aire agus a comhghleacaithe. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil siad dáiríre faoina gcuid polaitíocht. Tá seans ollmhór acu anois difear ollmhór a dhéanamh ar ábhar atá iontach tábhachtach don tír seo. Tá mé ag smaoineamh ar an teach a bhí ag an Rathailleach, a leagadh cúpla seachtain ó shin. Cosúil leis an nGaeilge, bhí an teach ina sheasamh. Tá an Ghaeilge fós ag seasamh sa tír seo. Leagadh an teach sin. Mar a deireann an fógra a bhíonn ar an teilifís, nuair atá sé leagtha tá sé imithe. I gcás na Gaeilge, nuair a bheidh sí imithe mar theanga phobail sa Ghaeltacht, beidh sí imithe i ndáiríre. Tá sé go hiontach ar fad go bhfuil naisc fós ann timpeall na tíre mar gheall ar an nGaeilge - labhraíonn daoine ar fud na tíre an Ghaeilge lá i ndiaidh lae - ach is é bun agus barr an scéil ná nach mbeidh todhchaí dhomhain shaibhir ag an teanga as seo amach muna bhfuil sí mar theanga labhartha phobail sa Ghaeltacht.

Tá an Ghaeilge tábhachtach agus luachmhar do mhuintir na hÉireann toisc gur chuid bhunúsach dinn í. Ceanglaíonn sí lenár dtimpeallacht muid. Is stór saibhir litríochta, ealaíne, amhránaíochta, startha, miotaseolaíochta agus seanchais í. Struchtúr smaointe atá sa teanga, i ndáiríre, freisin. Ag an tráth seo, nuair a chailltear éagsúlacht teanga ar bhonn bliantúil, is uathúil an teanga í. Tuigim go mbíonn na Glasaigh ag díriú isteach ar bhithéagsúlacht ar fud na cruinne, ach meabhraím dóibh go bhfuil teangacha ag fáil bháis lá i ndiaidh lae ar fud an domhain freisin. Is saghas stór iontach de chultúr na hÉireann í an Ghaeilge. Tá an teanga cosúil le doras - nuair a osclaítear é, bíonn an seomra lán de rudaí iontacha cultúrtha. Is féidir le daoine le Gaeilge an doras sin a oscailt. Tá an Ghaeilge uafásach tábhachtach mar theanga theaghlaigh, mar theanga ghnó, mar theanga chairdis agus mar theanga oideachais. Is fíorth-eanga í an Ghaeilge.

Is am cinniúnach é an t-am seo, i ndáiríre. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil sé sin ráite le fada an lá. Tá an Ghaeilge á labhairt sa tír seo le beagnach 2,000 bliain. Tá seans díreach ann gur muidne an ghlúin dheireanach ina mbeidh an Ghaeilge againn mar theanga phobail. Nuair a dhéantar comparáid idir líon na bpáistí atá á dtógáil le Gaeilge i measc na teaghlaigh ar fud na tíre agus líon na bpáistí ag freastal ar bhunscoileanna sna Gaeltachtaí, is léir go bhfuil go bhfuil an cóimheas sin an-íseal anois, go háirithe i gcomparáid leis na blianta roimhe seo.

Caithfidh rudaí láidre agus cróga a dhéanamh chun an Ghaeilge a shábháil agus a fhás sa Ghaeltacht. Tá mé lánchinnte gur féidir linn é sin a dhéanamh, agus go dtiocfaidh borradh ar an nGaeilge má táimid dáiríre faoi. Caithfidh bheith dáiríre faoin teanga. Muna bhfuilimid dáiríre, déanfaimid an praiseach chéanna is a rinne an Rialtas deireanach agus na Rialtais roimhe sin le fada an lá. Níor thug go leor Rialtais níos mó ná lip service don Ghaeilge. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil rudaí imithe chun donais. Má táimid ag iarraidh fianaise a fheiceáil sa chomhthéacs sin, is féidir linn breathnú isteach ar an mhéid airgid atá curtha ar fáil don Roinn thar na blianta. Ceapaim gurb é Roinn na Gaeltachta an t-aon Roinn sa Rialtas nach bhfuil tar éis an leibhéal a bhí acu in 2009 nó 2010 a bhaint amach arís. Is dóigh liom go raibh titim níos mó i Roinn na Gaeltachta ná aon Roinn ar bith eile. Mar is eol dúinn, tá sé mar dhualgas ar Údarás

na Gaeltachta mar eagraíocht fiontraíocht a fhorbairt sa Ghaeltacht. Tháinig titim uafásach ar an mhéid airgid a fhaigheann an tÚdarás. Níl maoiniú an Údaráis ar ais go dtí leibhéal 2009 nó 2010 go fóill.

Tá gá ann cúpla rud a dhéanamh chun an Ghaeilge a neartú sa tír seo. Is dóigh liom go bhfuil cúig rudaí thábhachtacha i gceist. Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba cheart don Rialtas cabhair a thabhairt do theaghlaigh a gcuid páistí a thógáil le Gaeilge. Is í sin an tslí is furasta chun an Ghaeilge a thabhairt don chéad ghlúin eile. Níl aon slí níos éasca ná an bealach a réiteach do theaghlaigh a gcuid páistí a thógáil le Gaeilge.

Ar an dara dul síos, tá rochtain Ghaelscolaíochta uafásach tábhachtach freisin. Bliain i ndiaidh bliana, léiríonn pobalbhreitheanna go bhfuil 25% de dhaoine na tíre seo ag iarraidh go rachaidh a gcuid páistí isteach sna Gaelscoileanna. Cén céatadán de pháistí na tíre seo a fhreastalaíonn ar Ghaelscoileanna, áfach? Ní fhreastalaíonn ach 5% de pháistí ar Ghaelscoileanna - is í sin an mhéid - cé go bhfuil 25% de thuismitheoirí ag iarraidh Gaelscolaíocht dá bpáistí. Deirtear uaireanta ar na meáin chumarsáide go bhfuil an Rialtas ag brú na Gaeilge síos scornacha na ndaoine, ach caithfear a rá go bhfuil a mhalairt fíor. Tá thuismitheoirí agus páistí ag iarraidh freastal ar Ghaelscoileanna. Tá daoine ag iarraidh seirbhísí ón Stát trí mheán na Gaeilge, ach níl na seirbhísí sin le fáil.

Ar an tríú dul síos, ba cheart go mbeadh daoine in ann dul i dteagmháil leis an Stát ina theanga féin. Tá an Rialtas seo ag rá le páistí go gcaithfidh siad an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim le haghaidh dosaen bhliain nuair atá siad óg. Ag an am céanna, tá lucht an Rialtais ag rá leo gan bheith ag teacht isteach agus bagairt a chur orthu mar gheall ar an nGaeilge - gan bheith ag labhairt leo mar gheall ar an nGaeilge - nuair atá a gcuid scolaíochta críochnaithe acu. Caithfidh mé a rá gur dhein mé iarracht ar feadh cúig nó sé bliana an Ghaeilge a roghnú mar theanga seirbhíse nuair a bhí mé i dteagmháil leis an Stát. Nuair a bhíodh mé i dteagmháil leis na Coimisinéirí Ioncaim, an Roinn Sláinte nó aon Roinn nó rannóg Stáit eile, bhrúfainn an cnaipe le haghaidh na seirbhíse Gaeilge ach ní bheadh éinne ar fáil. Saghas doras draíochta atá i gceist, i ndáiríre. Is féidir linn brú ar an doras, cé go bhfuil an seomra folamh, agus tá seans ann go dtiocfaidh duine éigin ar ais i gceann trí lá. Má thagann an glaoch ar an tríú lá agus má iarrtar orainn céard atá á lorg againn, is féidir linn a rá go bhfuilimid ag iarraidh seirbhís X, seirbhís Y nó seirbhís Z ach go hiondúil deirtear linn ag an bpointe sin go gcaithfidimid fanacht dhá nó trí lá eile, agus b'fhéidir go mbeifear in ann seirbhís trí Ghaeilge a sholáthar ag an bpointe sin. Nuair a tharlaíonn sé sin arís is arís eile, stopann daoine ag roghnú an rogha Gaeilge. Muna bhfuil an Stát sásta é seo a dhéanamh go huileghabhálach, ní úsáidfí daoine an tseirbhís teoranta seo.

Is í an tslí is éasca chun an fadhb seo a réiteach ná daoine le Gaeilge a earcú ionas go mbeidís in ann seirbhís a sholáthar trí Ghaeilge nó trí Bhéarla. Tá muidne ag troid le haghaidh deich mbliana, b'fhéidir, agus muid ag iarraidh ar an Rialtas córas earcaíochta den chineál seo a chur ar bun. Nuair a earcaítear comhréir le Gaeilge, níl aon chostas sa bhreis ag baint leis an tseirbhís a sholáthar trí Ghaeilge. Gabhaim buíochas le Dia go bhfuil a leithéid d'fhoráil sa Bhille seo i ndeireadh thiar thall. Cé go molaim an seasamh níos tréine atá tógtha ag an Aire agus a comhghleacaithe chun é sin a chur sa reachtaíocht seo, caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil get-out clause fós ann. Beidh cibé Aire a bheidh ann i gceann ocht mbliana in ann a rá nach bhfuil an Stát réidh chun an chéim seo a thógáil. Ar an mbonn sin, beidh Aire na linne sin in ann teacht siar ón ngeallúint sin go mbeidh an chomhréir bainte amach. I mo thuairim, beag beann ar pé Aire a bheidh ann sa bhliain 2028, ní bheidh sé nó sí an duine is fearr chun an cinneadh a dhéanamh. Ba cheart go mbeidh daoine eile atá bainteach leis an earnáil seo ar fáil leis an ról sin a chomhlíonadh.

Ar an gceathrú dul síos, ba cheart dúinn béim a chur ar fhostaíocht sa Ghaeltacht. Muna bhfuil daoine in ann obair a fháil sa Ghaeltacht, imeoidh siad. Is é sin scéal na Gaeltachta le fada an lá. Caithfidh go mbeidh sé ar chumas muintir na Gaeltachta obair mhaith a fháil sa Ghaeltacht, ach ní mar sin atá sé i go leor Gaeltachtaí ag an bomaite.

Ar an gcúigiú dul síos, is rud simplí é stádas na Gaeilge. Mar Dháil agus mar Stát, caithimid tosaíocht a thabhairt don Ghaeilge. Ní chosnaíonn sé mórán airgid, i ndáiríre. Nuair a fhoghlaimíonn daoine sa bhaile gur úsáideadh Google Translate chun Gaeilge a chur faoi bhráid na ndaoine i gcomhthéacs físeán ón Rialtas nó tvúit ón Aire, tuigeann siad nach bhfuil meas ar an nGaeilge nó stádas ag an nGaeilge. Tuigeann siad gur rud imeallach atá sa teanga, i ndáiríre. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil titim ag teacht ar stádas na Gaeilge anseo i dTeach Laighean agus ar fud an Stáit. Nuair a labhair mé le déanaí le daoine a bhí ag iarraidh teacht os comhair an Chomhchoiste um na Meáin, Turasóireacht, Ealaíona, Cultúr, Spórt agus Gaeltacht, dúirt siad liom nár fhéidir leo a gcuid gnó a dhéanamh leis an gCathaoirleach nua ar an gcoiste sin os rud é nach bhfuil Gaeilge aici. Is sampla eile é sin den easpa measa atá i gceist anseo.

Tuigim go bhfuil an t-am ag sleamhnú uaim, ach ba mhaith liom rud nó dhó eile a rá. Cathain a bheidh seirbhísí ar fáil do phobal na Gaeltachta i nGaeilge? An bhfuil spriocdháta daingean ag an Rialtas mar gheall ar an tseirbhís sin? Cathain a bheidh duine sa Ghaeltacht atá ag déanamh iarracht a chlann a thógáil trí Ghaeilge cinnte go bhfuil sé nó sí in ann gach seirbhís a bhaineann leis an Stát a fháil i nGaeilge? Sa Bhreatain Bheag, téann gach Bille os comhair coimisinéir teanga na tíre sin sula théann sé trí Chomhthionól na Breataine Bige. Ba cheart go mbeadh a leithéid d'fhoráil sa reachtaíocht seo. Dá mbeadh an Coimisinéir Teanga in ann féachaint ar na fadhbanna reachtaíochta roimh ré, ní tharlódh na deacrachtaí seo i dtús báire.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** B'fhearr liom caint as Béarla. I recently shared a post on social media not because this debate was coming up but, rather, because it struck a chord with me. The post in question was probably not written with Ireland in mind but it speaks to a hard truth and the responsibility on present and future Irish generations to act. The post I circulated states:

Speak your native language to your children or watch it die within the next 20 years!  
Looking down on your relatives or friends who speak your native tongue because you speak perfect English is stupid - it is like being proud of borrowed clothes!

As we contemplate Brexit and the need for our exporters to look to new market opportunities on the European mainland and beyond, we rarely consider language to be a significant barrier. We have come to expect that customers in those countries will have a reasonable proficiency in speaking English. It rarely impacts on our thought processes that English is not their mother tongue but, rather, was taught to them as part of their early school learning. How is it that so many people from Finland, Germany, Holland and Sweden to name but a few can engage in conversation in English, often flawlessly, despite it being a second language for them? Many of them also speak a third language with equal ability. How is it that even though our children begin learning Irish from national school age and on into secondary school, so many pupils graduate without the ability to carry on even an informal conversation in Irish after 14 years of education? Many students who decide to opt for another language in secondary school, such as French, German or Spanish, leave school with far greater proficiency in that language after five or six years of study than they have in Irish, which they have been taught for 14 years. As part of new technology sector developments, Irish students are being encouraged to learn Chinese. It is a sad fact that many of those who do so will develop greater ability to communicate in that language than in their cultural mother tongue.

I accept that the aspiration of the Bill is to increase access for those who wish to engage with public sector services through the medium of Irish. I acknowledge that implementation of the steps contained in the Bill may be a positive development in improving frequency and some fluency in Irish-language usage in public service communications, but those steps alone will not be enough to secure Gaeilge as a contemporary used language in Ireland into the future. In our current battle with Covid, there may be consideration of a circuit breaker announcement, that being a deliberate step-change initiated by the Government and designed to completely reset the parameters of dealing with Covid transmission in this country. If we are serious about preserving this mother tongue, such an action is now required to reset and redefine our national attitude and the value we place on our national language.

As Irish people, we often take pride in the international recognition of our venerated names, our culture and our traditions, yet we often fail to associate that cultural development with the Irish language or acknowledge that it was largely communicated and facilitated through the medium of our Gaelic language. Our inability to secure Irish as a working requisite language in this country is because of its deliberate downgrading within the outlines of what constitutes national identity and its modern dissociation with brand Ireland. In the Ireland of 2020, a large proportion of citizens speak English as their mother tongue. We consider ourselves intrinsically different from the rest of Europe even though many of us cannot carry on a conversation in the language of our forebears. Such a situation would be laughed at in France, Germany, Finland, Sweden and many other countries I could mention. Our country requires an Irish language circuit breaker moment. Although the Bill is welcome, it will not provide such a moment.

To preserve Irish as a working language, we need a new national debate on how we value the language, the way in which it is taught in our schools and how we can integrate it into daily use so as to defend our Gaelic culture and traditions and so that we can message widely that we continue to retain a unique history, perspective and identity. In truth, to achieve such a goal, the Government might need to announce legislation outlawing and custodial sentences penalising the teaching or speaking of Irish, in light of the fact that throughout our long history it has often been the case that we only value something when there is a threat that others may take it away.

As an interim step in securing the use of our native language, I welcome the Bill. I see it as a bulwark to the erosion and loss of our ability to converse in our mother tongue. The Bill provides for an objective of 20% of recruits to the public service being competent in Irish, which I welcome. It also provides for the introduction of language standards in place of language schemes, a national plan for the provision of Irish language services and the adaption of public bodies' ICT systems to accommodate the representation of a person's name as Gaeilge. I welcome the proposed establishment of an Irish language services advisory committee to oversee the drafting of a national plan for the provision of public services through Irish, which will set strategies for public bodies to increase the provision of services through Irish and increase the number of staff who are competent in Irish. However, I question the fact that there is to be only one member nominated by the Minister as a representative of the Gaeltacht area. That is hardly the level of representation our Irish language speakers need and it does not convey to me the appropriate level of engagement or commitment by the Government to the issue of Irish people being able to communicate effectively as Gaeilge with public institutions and with one another.

As Ireland moves to being a more multicultural society, we must embrace the challenges that brings, but also capitalise on the opportunities. We have a unique and proud history, unparalleled impact on world affairs given our small size and a diaspora that spans the globe and is counted in millions. Our Irish language is a natural resource unique in the world, a resource

that we have cultivated like our landscape. We must honour and protect it but in order to do so, we must use it. In using it, we must emphasise that it is the unique characteristic that an Irish person can carry abroad as a beacon of nationality and use at home as an anchor to a proud and cultured tradition. Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** I wish to apologise for speaking on the Bill in English. I am not one of those who has any fluency in our native tongue and I regret that. Like many others, I am a product of an education system which did not help me to get a grasp of Gaeilge. I would love to be speaking as Gaeilge and am committed to learning and using the cúpla focal inside and outside the House.

In my county, there are two small Gaeltacht areas, namely, Ráth Chairn and Baile Ghib. People were relocated to those areas from the western seaboard between 1935 and 1937, leaving their humble abodes to head to county Meath under a resettlement scheme undertaken by the Irish Land Commission. Like every other Gaeltacht, the very survival of those areas is threatened because of a lack of investment in local jobs, education and the protections that would have allowed them to thrive and be a beacon of the revival of Gaeilge and living as Gaeilge from cradle to grave.

There is a need for additional funding for Foras na Gaeilge, Údarás na Gaeltachta, TG4 and Raidió Rí-Rá. I have met those groups and they have asked that they be adequately resourced such that they can properly implement, assist and plan in conjunction with the 80 Irish-language and Gaeltacht groups that currently exist. Children from disadvantaged areas do not have the option to attend a summer college in the Gaeltacht as the fees are so high. Will the Minister consider bringing in a scholarship scheme such as that recommended in the investment plan by the 80 Irish-language and Gaeltacht groups in order that such students have the option of attending summer college in the Gaeltacht?

It is good that the Bill is before the House because it is an acknowledgement of the failure of the State to deliver its services bilingually nationwide and as Gaeilge in Gaeltachtaí such as Baile Ghib and Ráth Chairn. There are wonderful people there who are tireless warriors for their community. I invite the Minister to visit the area. The Comharchumann Ráth Chairn would be more than willing to give her a tour if she has not been there previously.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The Irish language has been spoken on this island since some time in the first millennium BC. It was the primary vernacular until the late 18th century but then experienced a collapse in its population of native speakers, particularly in the second half of the 19th century. Support for the use of the Irish language has consistently been a stated aim of the State since its establishment. However, the most recent research makes it clear that on current trends, use of the Irish language as the primary community language, that is, the normal language of discourse in the range of everyday interaction settings in the Gaeltacht, will not continue beyond 2025. By contrast, there has been a consistent growth in the number of Irish speakers in the State overall. However, despite this growth, the population of active speakers, daily and weekly speakers outside the education system and outside the Gaeltacht, has not reached what might be regarded as a relatively significant population density, being less than 5% in all but a small number of electoral districts.

Based on a range of surveys conducted over recent years, support for the Irish language retains broad public support. It also enjoys significant constitutional protection as the national and first official language, as well as having become a working language in the European Union



in 2007. The United Nations has recognised language rights as a component of human rights. Finally, evidence of the potential benefits of bilingualism have been growing since the 1960s. An increasing body of research suggests that bilingual populations may enjoy significant cognitive and health advantages over monolingual ones.

I welcome the fact that this Bill is finally coming before the Dáil. It is long overdue. The Official Languages (Amendment) Bill is an important element of development and sustaining a stronger and more fit-for-purpose language Act.

Three areas must be delivered as part of this Bill. The fragile state of Irish in Gaeltacht areas is evident in the census results and in various pieces of research in recent years. It is, therefore, vital that the provisions of public services through Irish in the Gaeltacht is placed on a statutory footing and that the language rights of the Gaeltacht community should be underpinned by the legislation. Unfortunately, at this stage, the Bill appears to contain no firm provisions placing a duty upon the State to ensure that the Gaeltacht community is served in its native language. This is a point which has been highlighted repeatedly by the Irish Language Commissioner.

I support the recommendation that a national statutory plan for the provision of public services through Irish be prepared and that new recruitment policies and practices should be an integral part of this plan. However, I am concerned that external experts and the public are not adequately represented on the advisory committee to be established under the amended Act to prepare the implementation plan. I am also concerned that there is no stated deadline for the publication of the plan and that there is no statutory obligation to implement any agreed plan.

One of the main provisions of the Bill is the proposal to replace the language schemes system with a system of language standards. This is a worthwhile proposal, but it is difficult to judge the possible impact of this change without sight of the draft standards. I believe that the timely production of these draft standards would greatly benefit the process of assessing the Bill. Can the Minister of State clarify today whether these draft standards have, in fact, been published, as I have been unable to obtain them to date?

It would be remiss of me not to mention Cape Clear Island, one of the eight islands in my constituency in west Cork. They have been speaking fluent Irish and promoting the Irish language on the island for many years. I commend each and every person on Cape Clear who, I suppose, has gone against the trend. It has been a massive promotion for tourism in the area, with people attending courses and whatever there. In fairness to the people of Cape Clear, they have made such a Trojan effort to keep the Irish language alive. It is an eye-opener for the rest of the constituency in Cork South-West and something that I commend greatly. I commend each and every person on that island for doing so.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I too am delighted to get cúpla nóiméad chun caint faoin straitéis don Ghaeilge.

I am proud to come from Caisleán Nua na Siúire i dTiobraid Árann Theas agus na Déise - an paróiste chéanna. In fact, my grandmother did not have any English. Caisleán Nua was a breac-Ghaeltacht area up until 1957. For the record, I happened to be born in 1958. I did not have the privilege of knowing my grandmother.

That was the spirit in the foothills of the Knockmealdowns and, indeed, the Comeraghs. It was an áit álainn. It is still an áit an-álainn ar fad for people to come and visit and see. Many activities are carried out there trí Ghaeilge.

I salute Helen Nic Craith, Catherine McCarra and cúpla duine eile. Thosaíomar Naíonra Caisleán Nua na Siúire 20 bliain ó shin and it is a wonderful success. It is wonderful to see na daltaí. They are preschool. Barely out of the cot, they go into that school. It caters for after-school and before school and indeed, the bigger children atá ag dul ar an scoil náisiúnta tar éis an naíonra freisin. I note the way that they can pick up the Irish and their grasp of it, and the fun-loving way that the múinteoirí sa naíonra sin are running it and the love that they have, above all, for the children, but also for the language, the heritage or dúchas. It is tremendous. There are many naíonraí throughout the country. It is a great way of re-energising our teanga náisiúnta. It is very important. We can have all the strategies in the world but if we do not use it, we will lose it. We have to adopt some kind of a strategy of use it or lose it.

Thosaíomar coláiste samhraidh Caisleán Nua 20 bliain ó shin freisin and that went very well for 12 years. It was through the medium of Irish again, and fun. One would not be sent home from the Gaeltacht. There were many counts of daltaí, maybe daltaí mór agus daltaí dána perhaps, sent home from the Gaeltachtaí that we knew of in different parts of the country, such as Corca Dhuibhne. We did this through the medium of fun and it was very successful. I salute the late Delia Egan, who was a founder member - bhí mé ann freisin - Tomás Ó Slatara and George de Barra, Catherine McCarra agus daoine mar sin as ucht an obair stairiúil a rinneadar. It was very successful. Tháinig na daltaí ó Thiobraid Árann, Port Láirge agus a lán áiteanna eile, agus chuid acu ó Bhaile Átha Cliath agus áiteanna mar sin. When we had the breac-Ghaeltacht up until 1957, it was an industry as well and it supplemented the incomes of the ordinary people who took in the daltaí or students.

I salute former Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú, ard-stiúrthóir Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, agus a bhean chéile. Dúirt Labhrás ar “The Late Late Show” oíche amháin gur fhoghlaim sé a chuid Gaeilge i gCaisleán Nua. He always says that he is proud he learned it in Caisleán Nua.

Is mór an trua nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge go flúirseach agam anois ach tá mé chun é a thosú arís.

I salute the families who took in the students in those days. I remember meeting some of them in later years and hearing the fond memories they had. They stayed in lodgings or “digs”, and they got a fine country dinner. Often they went out and gave a hand picking the spuds at this time of year with the farmers. They got a feeling for the culture, our cluichí freisin, ar nós peile agus iománaíochta, and, above all, our dúchas. They loved that. That friendship has held up with those people. Tá siad i Sasana agus a lán áiteanna ar fud an domhain. That relationship or connectivity is still there.

We have a community policing unit in Cathair Dhún Iascaigh anois, in Cahir Garda station, under the guidance of Sergeant Ray Moloney and Superintendent Denis Whelan and the team there. Not only are they involved in the community and doing a wonderful job at this time of difficulties with Covid, and visiting the people, re-energising in this new level 3 and ready for whatever else might come, but Sergeant Moloney gives comhrá cois tine in Cahir House Hotel, Tigh Óstán Chathair Dhún Iascaigh, gach oíche Luain. There are a number of people there, such as Gavin Berry, an múinteoir. As the people are coming in, they are finding it an tslí ceart chun an Gaeilge a fhoghlaim. It is a nice, soft, simple way of learning and picking up the Irish, transgressing it with English and, indeed, linking it to the logainmneacha. These placenames are very important. All those old placenames are oozing with our culture. They are oozing with our heritage. Fr. Christy O'Dwyer from Cashel, a renowned hurler for Tipperary fadó, gave me a valuable masterpiece including all the old seanfhocail as Gaeilge agus as Béarla. It is a

wonderful historical reservoir and I must learn much more from it.

However, I thank Fr. Christy and wish him well in his retirement from Cashel. Christy O'Dwyer was a renowned hurler for Tipperary fadó fadó.

Sergeant Ray Moloney and the team there, and my own iníon, Máirín McGrath, get a lot of fun from this engagement every Monday night and they look forward to going back as soon as the cloud that hangs over our communities is gone. That is the way to do it. There should be more of that strategy in that area. Ní neart go cur le daoine. Na daoine óga sa naíonra.

People might not realise but the múinteoirí in the national schools have a huge part to play. There have been many famous múinteoirí thar na blianta and many people learned it from them.

4 o'clock When I went to school, bhí mé i mo bhuachaill dána i gcónaí agus níor fhoghlaim mé mórán Gaeilge. Deputy Shanahan mentioned that if Irish was banned we would all be speaking it, I have often said so myself. We are a wonderful country for resisting rules and regulations. We must pay more attention to it.

While I welcome this strategy, there are a lot of gaps in it. We have Foras na Gaeilge, Údarás na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, CCE, agus Glór na nGael freisin. CCE is a wonderful organisation facilitating song and dance, amhránaíocht, seanfhocail, rince sean-nós and all the wonderful parts of our heritage and culture. The sessions are often completely through Irish and they are wonderful. We were involved in our own paróiste in Glór na nGael competitions and enjoyed some success when we had the Coláiste Cois Siúire ar siúl. Tá súil agam go mbeidh Coláiste Cois Siúire ann arís an bhliain seo chugainn, le cúnamh Dé. Tús nua arís. Many people cannot afford the full-on Gaeltacht experience for a month or trí seachtaine. It costs a lot of money. Our project was simple. Buses collected people from a 30-mile radius, or beyond. People came for the day and went home full of fun. They would be there on their buses picking up their tin whistles and singing sean-nós. They were not ag rince on the bus although some of them were trying. It was a wonderful way of doing it through fun. All these organisations are doing hard work but we need more of a meitheal approach, and less of top bodies but a sense of learning up from the síolta, ón talamh suas. Let us plant the seeds and it will grow. Then there are the GAA clubs. Caisleán Nua GAA club also helped us, and we used its facilities. We used the Muintir na Tíre community hall. I salute them. They all got an income from that. It was a very good model for a summer college, coláiste samhraidh, and people made a few pounds out of it too. That was not their motive but it was a spin-off. There were concerts and Aifreann faoin spéir. There was an open air mass on the final night with the buachaillí and cailíní choláiste and there was fierce passion, energy and enthusiasm. I had the privilege of presenting prizes. There was much interest in it. Na daoine óga made friends and they are still friends today. The main age group was ocht mbliana d'aois go dtí 13 bliana. Then they went on to secondary school and made friends, and some are still friends in university. Some are in dancing classes and have been to the world championships. I am not saying they learned it all there but they had wonderful dancing teachers such as Kathy McGrath and Monnie Hallahan in different places around Tipperary. They developed the skill but they got the love and taste in the scoil samhraidh. That is vital to like it. I have often seen the bata scoir in school when the Irish was beaten into people but it did not achieve the desired effect and it never will; it will be resisted. There should be more groups like Sergeant Moloney's. It is simple and soft while people have their cup of tea or coffee. In Newcastle we also had comhrá cois tine in people's houses, which is especially lovely in the winter months. I do not know if we can do it this year. It would be too cold to sing in the wind or le bheith ag caint but we can do our best. We will look at the strategy and see.

Under the legislation, 20% of entrants to the Civil Service are expected to be proficient in Irish. That idea has been there for a long time but has it happened? People complain about the huge cost of translating all the European diktats into Irish but we will see. I was in a lovely hostelry in Bray last night where I am staying where I met a Chinese man who had better English than myself. He is in Ireland 18 or 20 years. It is amazing what we can learn when we have to. He is highly proficient in English. I meet many people from different lands who pick up Irish quite easily. Some say it is an easier language to learn than their own. With the multicultural cities and country that we have and that we all embrace, why not have pride in our own Gaeilge? A nation is not a nation without its language, as Pádraig Pearse said. If we do not have that what do we have? I have often known people who have gone abroad, if they get into trouble and are questioned in a police station, they use Irish and they often have to make phone calls home in Irish to see if there is any chance of a cúpla quid sa phost. We have cards now and can transfer money but before that it went in the post. They would be embarrassed but they could speak in their own language. It is amazing the ingenuity we have to use it when it suits us. I say: use it or lose it. That is what we should do under this strategy.

The strategy mentions of language rights and that the UN has recognised our rights but the UN has recognised lots of rights, and what good is it? I met people outside the gates here protesting about what is going on in Azerbaijan. The UN has enough to do without expecting it to support Irish. Certainly, Irish should be protected and preserved. We should do it ourselves from the ground up.

Tá siad go léir básaithe anois, but there were a lán daoine in Caisleán Nua ag caint trí Ghaeilge up to deich mbliana ó shin, such as Mattie O'Leary, Padraig O'Keeffe, Seán Ó Donnagáin, agus mo thuismitheoirí freisin. It is amazing that people did not have English as a language at all in my village, Caisleán Nua na Siúire, up to the late 1950s. It is a pity we ever lost the breac-Ghaeltacht status. I will knock on the Minister's door to see if we can look at the model a bhí ann fadó and restart it. We talk about clusters and counties and boundaries now. Maybe we should start small and try to support a pilot in areas where there is a residue. We are only 20 míle ó Dhún Garbhán agus 25 míle ón Rinn. We are all part of the Déise and proud of our history and the historic kings in Cashel. It is a very rich cultural area. We must do better having more bilingual signage. I thank the county council in Tipperary and the roads engineer for putting up some lovely artistic signs recently in both languages. We can learn a lot. We must try to engage the daoine óga i gcónaí. We have the right model with the re-emergence of our Coláiste Cois Siúire. It is an easier way to learn and it enlivens the spirit and interest of the whole community. Ní neart go cur le chéile. We need to bring the community with us because we cannot do anything otherwise. The African saying is that it takes a village to raise a child. It takes a community to regain and rekindle the spirit of our seantuismitheoirí and the people going back so that we can remember them proudly, through the medium of Irish, with the heritage they left for us to mind.

I look forward to working with the Minister. She might pay Coláiste Cois Siúire a visit lá amháin.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Táim ag iarraidh eitilt ar leath-sciathán anois. Tá rud beag náire orm nach bhfuil mo chaighdeán chomh maith agus ba chóir dó a bheith. Ní chleachtaim minic go leor ach bainfidimid triail as.

Táimid ag caint ar an mBille seo agus ba chóir go mbeidh cabhair agus tacaíocht ag achán duine chun go mbeidh siad in ann a ghnó a dhéanamh trí mheán na Gaeilge. Caithfidimid feabhas

a chur ar chúpla rud. Tá timelines de dhíth mar gheall ar an sprioc de 20%. Caithfimid plean a bheith againn chun na timelines sin a bhaint amach. Caithfimid cloí leo toisc go gcaithfimid cabhair agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaoine.

Chomh maith leis sin, bhí cuid mhór dúinn ag caint le Conradh na Gaeilge. Tá tacaíocht airgeadais de dhíth fá choinne na teanga. Tá airgead ag teastáil ó Fhoras na Gaeilge, ó Údarás na Gaeltachta, ó Raidió Rí-Rá agus ó TG4. Caithfimid an t-airgead sin a chur ar fáil. Chomh maith leis sin, bhí daoine ag caint faoi na coláistí samhraidh, go háirithe sna Gaeltachtaí. Tá cuid mhór chabhrach agus tacaíochta ag teastáil ó na teaghlaigh uilig a chuireann a tithe ar fáil - na mná tí agus a leithéidí. Tá cabhair agus tacaíocht uathu. Tá tacaíocht de dhíth freisin fá choinne na coláistí. Caithfimid é a chur ar fáil.

Caithfimid polasaí níos fearr a bheith againn mar gheall ar oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge. Táim ag caint faoi thacaíocht i leith naíonraí chomh maith le bunscoileanna, meánscoileanna agus institiúidí tríú leibhéal. Caithfidh a leithéid de pholasaí a bheith againn. Tá fadhb againn i nDún Dealgan le Coláiste Lú. Tá cuid mhór tuismitheoirí ag déanamh obair an-mhaith chun an déileáil leis an bhfadhb seo ach tá ar an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna tacaíocht a thabhairt.

Táimid ag tacú leis an mBille seo ach caithfidh achan rud a tharla chomh gasta agus is féidir.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Anois tá na Teachtaí Harkin agus Pringle againn ar son an Ghrúpa Neamhspleách.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I hope the Chair does not mind me addressing him, but when he was speaking earlier, I wondered whether he had ever been one of the daltaí dána about whom he spoke.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Ba dhalta dána mé go han-mhinic ar fad agus is ceann mé fós to this day.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute on the Bill. My one regret is that I am unable to use our first language. I envy those who can. Nonetheless, it does not in any way diminish my firm belief that strong measures need to be taken to facilitate greater use of and familiarity with our language and to guarantee our citizens that they can use the medium of Irish when availing of State services. For too long, we as a country - I include myself in this - paid a certain amount of lip service to promoting the use of our language. Legislation guaranteeing citizens a certain level of service through Irish is a positive move.

Among those who have walked the walk and not just paid lip service are the people who have established the more than 250 Gaelscoileanna throughout the country. Establishing any school is a major undertaking. The commitment and determination of those who have driven the establishment of our Gaelscoileanna is admirable. I refer to Aonad Loch Gile, which is in Mercy College, Sligo where I had the privilege of teaching for 20 years. Aonad Loch Gile was established after I left, although do not take that to mean anything. It has been a successful undertaking and contributed much to the language's use in an everyday way. It makes the language accessible to all who want to access it and normalises its use.

An increase number of people either speak the language or want to speak it. That is why we need a comprehensive policy for the teaching of Irish from preschool to third level and beyond. The language must form part of our lifelong learning. People like me who have a basic knowledge of it would then have an opportunity to improve our usage. An Scéim Pobal Gaeilge,



which is run by Foras na Gaeilge, is an example of lifelong learning. It is an Irish-in-the-community scheme that involves community development through the Irish language. It reaches people whose formal educational opportunities have probably passed and puts the language at the centre of people's everyday lives. The programme needs extra supports. We also need to develop Irish language centres. They normalise the language's use in our everyday activities.

In the above context, the Bill is relevant. It is about the State providing services to its citizens inside and outside Gaeltachtaí through the medium of Irish. The Bill will help to underpin many of the voluntary and community actions that have been taken to promote the language. It will also recognise the rights of Irish speakers in Gaeltachtaí and elsewhere.

One of the Bill's most important aspects is the need to include timescales for the proposed actions. There will be a 20% recruitment target of Irish speakers in the public service and all public offices that provide public services in Gaeltachtaí will operate through the medium of Irish. The timescale for these measures is 2030. That must be our target delivery date. The Minister will appreciate that the date should be fixed at 2030 just as it is fixed for a reduction in CO2 emissions and that we are determined to reach that point. It should be the date on which all State services from public bodies will be available in Irish to Gaeltacht communities.

It is important that we include the *síneadh fada*. I spent many years working in Brussels. No self-respecting French speaker would tolerate the idea of the grave, circumflex or any other French accent not being part of French written words. We must ensure that the same is the case in Ireland. It is how it should be. Anything else would simply be inappropriate.

All public forms, be they applications for driver licences, passports, carer's allowance or old age pensions, should be bilingual.

A study conducted by the Coimisinéir Teanga in 2018 illustrated that only 551 out of 21,000 staff working in Departments had sufficient competence in Irish to conduct business through it. The numbers may have changed slightly since, but even if that is the case, they represented only 3% of departmental staff in 2018. That highlights the need for the provisions in this Bill.

It is proposed that an Irish language statutory advisory committee will be set up to support the work we are discussing. That work will include the publication of a national plan for an increase in the provision of public services through the medium of Irish. This plan is hugely important because it will ensure a systemic, planned and co-ordinated approach. The process must not be open-ended and should include a timeframe for the drafting of the plan.

The Bill provides for a duty on prescribed public bodies to facilitate the use of a person's name, address or title in the Irish language. This includes the patronymic and metronymic forms of a person's name, which are of cultural significance, especially in Gaeltacht areas. The rest of us could learn something from that.

As I said, official forms are required to be published bilingually or in Irish. It is also proposed that when renewing or altering logos, public bodies should ensure that text which forms part of the new or altered logo is in the Irish language or in both Irish and English. The introduction of language standards is essential.

Once the plan that will be produced by the Irish language statutory advisory committee is in place, it should be subject to a yearly review process in this House. It is important that we, as politicians, are able to monitor its progress and implementation. I understand the Minister has

proposed to introduce such a review mechanism.

I look forward to a reversal in the budget next week of some of the cuts in funding to Irish language bodies such as Foras na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, Glór na nGael, Gael Linn and Údarás na Gaeltachta. Those organisations were seen as low-hanging fruit during the most recent crisis and the cuts imposed on them must be reversed. They have severely impacted job creation efforts in Gaeltacht areas. We know that if there are no employment opportunities in an area, people will not stay there. Increased numbers of people are working from home since the start of the Covid crisis. We do not know whether they will continue to do so or if it will be the case for most of partly working from home and partly in the office. The latter is the more likely outcome. Either way, we have a real opportunity to ensure better employment prospects in Gaeltacht areas. That in itself will have the knock-on effect of promoting the language.

This Bill is a good start in seeking to address the issues, but the most important requirement is that its provisions are actually implemented. I know from speaking to several Irish speakers in recent days that the Bill is welcomed by the Irish-speaking community. However, it must be supplemented by budgetary measures that support the language.

Before I conclude, it is important to mention the important role of TG4, not just in its promotion of the language but also the fact that much of its content is produced in Gaeltacht communities. The same applies to Raidió Rí-Rá. It is not just about using the language but also providing an opportunity for participation and involvement by different communities. It has a hugely powerful effect when people have a sense of the language belonging to them. The Bill is welcome as an indication that the State will play its part in giving legislative support to Irish speakers.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Tá brón orm nach bhfuil mé ábalta an Ghaeilge a labhairt i rith an contribution seo. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. We have waited far too long for these proposals to come to the House. The Bill amends the 2003 Act, which has not been fit for purpose for a long time, and attempts to ensure that the Irish-speaking population can engage with the State through Irish.

It is useful to consider how we got here. In 2011, the programme for Government set out the intention of the then Government to review the 2003 Act with a view to ensuring that expenditure in this area was best targeted towards the development of the language and that obligations would be imposed appropriately in response to demands from citizens. In 2014, a public consultation took place on the review of the Act. It identified a significant demand for services through the medium of the Irish language on a par with services provided through the medium of the English language. There was an attempt in 2014 to amend the legislation but it did not come to anything. We recognised then that the existing Act was no good. More than nine years later, in 2020, we are finally amending that outdated legislation. As well as taking a long time to get here, it has been a hard battle to do so. It is welcome that legislative action is being taken at last but it must be implemented with urgency.

Unfortunately, the Bill does not go far enough. I am happy that the Government intends to introduce amendments, but we have not had sight of them. Based on what the Minister said, they still do not go far enough because they do not reflect the emergency that exists in Gaeltacht areas. Once again, the Government is not listening to the people who are directly affected by the legislation in question. The Government has not even listened to the Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus na nOileán. The members of that committee, during the previous

Dáil, travelled around the country to every Gaeltacht area and listened to the people living there, who have a deep understanding of the emergency facing their population. The committee also heard from the Coimisinéir Teanga and all interested stakeholders. On foot of these consultations, it published a unanimous cross-party report in May 2018 that contained 20 practical recommendations. In the report, the Chairman of the committee expressed concerns in regard to the lack of recognition of the emergency in the Gaeltacht and among the Irish-speaking community. That concern is not addressed at all in the Bill and it is clear that the Government did not take account of what the committee had to say. People in Gaeltacht areas relayed to the committee that, unless supported, the Irish-speaking population will be wiped out. We know that the numbers of native Irish speakers are at a critical level. We must start with the recognition that there is an emergency. There should be a strong statement in the Bill that we are in an emergency, just as the climate change and biodiversity emergency is acknowledged in the climate change legislation. An urgent action plan to address this emergency is needed.

Native Irish speakers or people who choose to speak Irish cannot engage or interact with the State in Irish, notwithstanding the recognition in the Constitution that Irish is our first official language. The provision in the Bill of a requirement that, by 2030, 20% of public service employees must be bilingual is to be welcomed as partly addressing that issue. However, it is a cause for alarm that the provision also states that whichever Minister is in charge in 2030 may extend the timeframe for meeting that target. The deadline of 2030 is already too far out but the Minister of the day is to be given the option to push it out further. It seems this Government is going to act on climate change but not on the Irish language emergency. The reality is that people cannot access services through Irish, whether online, by telephone or in person. This was laid bare in the summer during the public consultation process on the mess that is the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020. In that case, legislative proposals that will have an impact on great swathes of the Irish-speaking population were not available through Irish.

Another section of the Bill that needs to be addressed is that dealing with the powers of the Coimisinéir Teanga. As it stands, he or she is permitted to act only within the confines of the Official Languages Act. The powers of the Coimisinéir Teanga must be extended beyond that Act to enable him or her to examine other legislation. It is vitally important in this day and age that the Coimisinéir Teanga would be able to examine other legislation enacted by the Oireachtas to see whether it is benefiting the Irish language. After all, Irish is the official language of the State. One would not see a similar situation in any other country. Similar to the way in which we poverty-proof and gender-proof legislation, the Coimisinéir Teanga must have the power to ensure legislation recognises the Irish language emergency that exists and either helps to address it or at least does no further harm. That is the least that is required.

I welcome the introduction of this Bill but the reality is that it simply does not go far enough. I look forward to further discussions on Committee Stage when we will put forward amendments to make the Bill work effectively.

Cuireadh an díospóireacht ar athló

Debate adjourned.

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

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 29A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss the funding deficit in local authorities; (2) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss the delayed appointment of staff in Droghe-da town to work on the national development plan; (3) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the concerns raised by employees of Aer Lingus to access social welfare supports; (4) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss the provision of high speed broadband throughout north Cork; (5) Deputy Bríd Smith - to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on staffing levels in St. Catherine's National School, Donore Avenue; (6) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss the review of the midwifery led unit in Cavan General Hospital; (7) Deputy Patrick Costello - to discuss the implementation of the national Traveller health action plan and the targeted resources to address the mental health crisis in the Traveller community; (8) Deputy Carol Nolan - to discuss the need for reforms to the fair deal scheme; (9) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - to discuss the status of the implementation of the Scally and MacCraith reports on CervicalCheck; (10) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss planning issues and the proposed development of the Shannon pipeline; (11) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss access to public liability insurance for the leisure and community sector; (12) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss the European Commission's REACH Committee's recent adoption of a regulation on the use of lead gunshot; (13) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the delay in teachers being paid in recent weeks; and (14) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss the closure of Sancta Maria College, Rathfarnham due to no heating.

The matters raised by Deputies Matt Carthy, Jennifer Whitmore, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and John Lahart have been selected for discussion.

## **Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2019: An Dara Céim (Atógáil)**

### **Official Languages (Amendment) Bill 2019: Second Stage (Resumed)**

Atairgeadh an cheist: "Go léifear an Bille an Dara hUair anois"

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

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis an Aire agus leis an Aire Stáit. Is deas an rud é, tar éis naoi mbliana de bhearna, go bhfuil Aire sinsearach Gael-tachta ann go bhfuil Gaeilge aici agus go bhfuil spéis aici sa Ghaeilge. Is mór an dul chun cinn é sin. Bhí sé sin leagtha síos sa straitéis 20 bliain.

Tá an-áthas orm faoin méid daoine a labhair sa Dáil inniu, Teachtaí Dála ó chuile thaobh den Teach. Bhí páirtí mór amháin ar an taobh seo den Teach nach raibh aon chainteoir acu, ach labhair go leor Teachtaí i mBéarla agus i nGaeilge. Ceann de na heasnamh a bhí ann in 2002 nuair a phléadh an chéad Acht ná nár ghlac na daoine gan Ghaeilge mórán páirt sa Bhille.

Rud eile a chuireann fíor-áthas orm ná go bhfuil chuile duine a labhair inniu i bhfabhar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla a láidriú. Má bhraitheann muid siar go dtí 2011, an rud a bhí i gceist an t-am sin ná gur cheart é a lagú mar gur chosnaigh sé an iomarca airgid. Buíochas le Dia, ar

a laghad ar bith, tá na polaiteoirí tagtha ar mhalairt intinne faoi sin agus is dul chun cinn é sin.

Ar ndóigh, in 2003 tháinig Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla ann don chéad uair. Is aisteach a rá, tar éis tagairt sonrach sa Bhunreacht in 1937 go bhféadfaí forálacha a dhéanamh de réir dlí maidir le cúrsaí teanga, nach ndearnadh é sin riamh go dtí 2003. An bliain dár gcionn, bunaíodh Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga. An bunús a bhí leis an oifig sin ná go mbeadh dream nó duine ann a bhféadfadh cearta a chosaint le nach mbeadh ar shaoránaigh dul chun cúirte le cearta Gaeilge a bhaint amach. Sa bhliain 2020 táimid deich mbliana trí straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge. Cúis aiféala nach gcuireadh an plean sin i bhfeidhm – bhí rudaí beaga agus rinneadh rudaí áirithe, mar shampla, an polasaí oideachas Ghaeltachta, ach is beag a rinneadh. Ní hé gur theip ar an straitéis, níor trialladh an straitéis, níor cuireadh i bhfeidhm í. Bhí sé i gceist gur straitéis Rialtais a bhí ann a mbeadh baint ag an bpobal leis ach a mbeadh tiomanta ag an Rialtas trí chéile, ní díreach ag an Aire amháin.

Cinnte, níor baineadh an oiread leas as Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla agus a d'fhéadfaí. Bhí laige áirithe le leagan amach na scéimeanna, níl aon amhras faoi sin, ach d'fhéadfaí níos mó leas a bhaint as. Bhí caint ag an Roinn go leagadh muid síos na heagraíochta a raibh dualgas níos mó orthu i ngach plean níos mó a dhéanamh. Chomh maith leis sin, mar shampla, tugadh isteach na hionstraimí reachtúla maidir le comharthaíocht. Bhíomar ag réiteach ionstraim reachtúla maidir le fógraíocht. An t-aon cheist a bhí á phlé ag an am ná an é go mbeadh rogha ag an bhfógróir Stáit, mar shampla, fógra a chur in *The Irish Times* agus ceann eile a chur i bpáipéar Gaeilge comhionann leis chun na rialacha a chomhlíonadh nó dá mbeadh fógra i mBéarla an leor ceann i nGaeilge a chur ar TG4. Bhí buntáiste leis an cur chuige sin, mar chuireadh sé airgead breise fógraíochta i dtreo na foilsitheoirí agus lucht craolacháin na Gaeilge. Beidh sé sin le plé againn arís nuair a bheidh an Bille ag dul tríd na Dála.

Níl aon amhras faoi, ní hé gur theip ar an Acht ach níor cuireadh i bhfeidhm é. Le naoi mbliana, bhí Rialtais ann nach raibh an oiread sin spéis acu sa rud nó sa cheist.

Ba mhaith liom béim a chur ar rud. Tá an-chaint anseo ar an nGaeltacht inniu, agus tá tábhacht leis an nGaeltacht. Ní aon amhras faoi sin agus tá mé féin i mo chónaí sa Ghaeltacht cé gur rugadh agus tógadh mé i gcathair Bhaile Átha Cliath. Fuair mé mo chuid oideachas ar fad trí Bhéarla. Ach ní mhairfidh an Ghaeltacht muna bhfuil an Ghaeilge láidir ar fud na tíre. Níl aon dream níos fearr a thuigeann é sin ná lucht na Gaeltachta. Ní reservation, mar a deir siad i Meiriceá, atá ann. Is gnáth Éireannaigh iad. Tagann go leor de phobal na Gaeltachta chun cónaí sna chathracha. Mar sin, agus muid ag freastal ar phobal na Gaeilge, caithfimid é a dhéanamh chuile áit a bhfuil éileamh ann. Ceann de na rudaí is spéisiúla ná an staidéar síceolaíochta a rinne an tAthair Mícheál Mac Gréil. Bhí sé in ann a chruthú gurb é an cheantair is mó agus an pobal is mó bá leis an nGaeilge ná an pobal meánaicmeach i mBaile Átha Cliath. Le gairid, mar shampla, nuair a bhuaigh Cuala craobh iomána Bhaile Átha Cliath, ní don chéad uair, is i nGaeilge a labhair an captaen agus Gaeilge breá den scoth aige. Ní haon eisceacht é i measc clubanna Bhaile Átha Cliath agus imreoirí sinsearach Bhaile Átha Cliath. Mar sin, caithfimid a thuiscint go gcaithfimid seirbhísí leithne a chur ar fáil trí Ghaeilge.

Rud amháin a gcaithfimid a fhoghlaim maidir le reachtaíocht ná ní athraíonn reachtaíocht an saol. Is gléas í leis an saol a athrú ach inti féin, ní athraíonn sí an saol. Caithfear obair dian a dhéanamh plean cuimsitheach a bheith ann le spriocanna na reachtaíochta a bhaint amach.

Bhriseadh sé do chroí an cur in aghaidh a bhí ag codanna den chóras Stáit sa tír don Acht teanga deireadh. Ní féidir a rá nár tugadh isteach ionstraim reachtúil láidir maidir le comhar-



thaíocht a dúirt go gcaitheadh comharthaí a bheith dátheangach. Shílfeá go raibh sé sin thar a bheith simplí. Chuir mé tweet amach tamaillín ó shin de chomhartha a dúirt: “FOOTPATH ENDS IN 40M” agus scríofa os a cionn i nGaeilge bhí “As Gaeilge 40m”. Tá a fhios ag chuile dhuine sa Ghaeltacht agus chuile dhuine a thriail riamh ar glaoch ar Chomhairle Contae an Gaillimhe nó ar aon cheann eile de na heagrais, agus teachtaireacht ar an bhfón á rá “Má tá tú ag iarraidh seirbhís a fháil trí Ghaeilge brú uimh. 1 nó trí Bhéarla brú uimh. 2”. Nuair a bhrúfear ar uimh. 1, deirtear nach bhfuil duine le Gaeilge ann faoi láthair ach teachtaireacht a fhágaint agus go dtiocfaidh duine ar ais chugat am éicint, uair éicint, lá éicint. An chéad uair eile, brúnn an duine ar uimh. 2 agus faightear an tseirbhís trí Bhéarla. Ní hionann é sin agus seirbhís.

Chonaic mé cheann breá le gairid. Cuireadh foirmeacha ar fud na Gaeltachta chuig feirmeoirí. Daonáireamh na mbeithíoch a bhí ann. Bhí an fhoirm ar fad i mBéarla. Bhí comhartha beag sa chúinne á rá má theastaíonn leagan Gaeilge, fios a chur ar an dream. Líon muid an foirm Bhéarla isteach i nGaeilge mar ní raibh muid le rá leis an bhfeirmeoir go gcaithfeadh sé a theacht ag an gclinic an dara huair chun an fhoirm a líonadh. Is an briseadh croí den rud ar fad nach féidir an fhoirm a chur amach go dátheangach agus an gnó a dhéanamh.

Tá sprioc uaillmhianach sa Bhille maidir le 20% d’earcaíocht na Státseirbhíse a bheith bainte amach do Ghaeilgeoirí faoin bhliain 2030. Beidh daoine ag rá nach bhfuil a dhóthain ansin, nach bhfuil sé sách sciobtha agus mar sin de, ach sí fírinne an tsaoil ná go gcaithfidh muid go leor oibre a chur isteach ón lá amárach amach ag cinntiú go mbeidh na daoine ann le hearcú. Caithfidh an córas oideachais, an córas ollscolaíochta agus an córas tríú leibhéal a bheith faoi réir agus caithfear infheistíocht ollmhór a dhéanamh le go mbeidh daoine inniúil ar an nGaeilge ann le cur isteach ar na poist seo. Is féidir an sprioc sin a scríobh san Acht ach ní tharlóidh sé agus déarfadh an tAire faoi cheann ocht mbliana nach bhfuil na daoine ann. Mar sin, ní leor an tAcht. Caithfidh an gníomh a theacht leis an Acht.

Ba mhaith liom cúpla eile a lua. Is maith liom an leagan amach atá sa Bhille seo agus tá go leor rudaí fiúntacha ann. Leagtar bunchearta síos san Acht agus cuirtear leo. Cheana féin tá buncheart ann maidir le comhfhreagras ach anois beidh rialacha ann agus beidh na bunchearta ar nós comhfhreagras san Acht féin. Beidh rialacháin, fo-orduithe agus pleananna ann freisin. Tá súil agam go bhfágfar na pleananna ann. Ní fheicim cúis ar bith iad a bhaint as mar feicim ról dóibh. Pléifidh mé an cheist sin tuilleadh leis an Aire agus an Aire Stáit ar Chéim an Choiste. Is maith liom go mbeifear in ann fo-ordú a dhéanamh ar rudaí. Is cumhacht thar a bheith tábhachtach é sin. Is cumhacht nua é, a fhorbraíonn go maith an rud atá ann agus tacaím leis sin.

Tá foráil sa Bhille a deir gur féidir le duine a ainm agus a sheoladh a úsáid i nGaeilge. Tá sé thar ama go mbeadh an ceart sin ag daoine. Níl aon rud níos seafóidí ná ag scríobh d’ainm i mBéarla. Rinne mise cúpla uair é ar shuíomh Aer Lingus. Scríobh mé isteach “Éamon Ó Cuív” agus nuair a chuaigh mé go dtí an deireadh agus bhrúigh mé an cnaipe, tháinig an rud ar ais ag rá nach féidir glacadh le m’ainm. Ansin is gá tosú arís agus d’ainm a chur isteach gan na síntí fada. Is maith an rud é go bhfuiltear ag díriú ar seo.

Tá caint ann freisin faoi theidil. Cuireann sé muisín orm go pearsanta nuair a fhaighim foirm agus deir sé Mr., Mrs. nó Miss. Táim tar éis staidéar a dhéanamh ar mo theastas breithe agus níl aon Mr., Mrs nó Miss air. An t-ainm atá ormsa ná Éamon Ó Cuív agus cé go bhfuil teideal orm mar Theachta sa Teach seo níor bhronn aon duine aon teideal orm. Is rud mínádúrtha sa Ghaeilge é. Ní théann muintir na Gaeltachta thart ag rá “an tUasal seo” agus “an tUasal siúd” mura bhfuil siad ag scigmhagadh faoi dhuine. Nach é Éamon Ó Cuív atá orm agus nach Aengus Ó Snodaigh atá ar an Teachta Ó Snodaigh? Is rud ó na Gaill é sin a tháinig isteach, le daoine ag

ceapadh go raibh siad tábhachtach agus ag cur teidil orthu féin. Ba cheart go mbeadh an rogha ag an bpobal nuair atá siad ag líonadh isteach foirmeacha agus an ceart dlíthiúil a bheith acu gan teideal a úsáid. Tá cuid acu níos fearr ná cuid eile. Áine Uí Chuív atá ar mo bhean agus is giorrúchán é “Uí Chuív” de “Áine, Bean Uí Chuív”, sé sin, léiríonn sé gurb í mo bheansa í, mar is Ní Choincheannain a bhí uirthi sular phós sí. Ansin, ar an bhfoirm, cuireann sí “Mrs. Áine Uí Chuív” agus tá an rud ráite faoi dhó. Is seafóid é. Tá súil agam nuair a thagann muid ag an mBille seo, go mbeidh sé de cheart reachtúil ag daoine gan teideal a chur síos ar aon fhoirm mura bhfuil teideal acu. Níl a fhios agam cén fáth go bhfuil teidil ann, dubh, bán nó riabhach. B’fhéidir gur rud Eorpach é nó rud éigin ach ní rud Éireannach é. Tá níos mó seans go dtabharfaí Micil Thomas Shéamuis ort sa Ghaeltacht ná go dtabharfaidís teideal ort. B’fhéidir go ndéarfadh daoine gur rud beag é ach breathnaíonn sé seafóideach má chuireann duine a n-ainm síos i nGaeilge. Maidir leis an rud a tháinig isteach de dhaoine ag úsáid “an tUasal Éamon Ó Cuív”, is muintir Chonradh na Gaeilge a chumadh é sin ag tús an chéad, ag déanamh aithris ar nósanna na nGall. Níl aon chiall leis ar chor ar bith.

Tá áthas orm go bhfuil an Rialtas ag díriú isteach ar cheist Coimisiún na Logainmneacha. Ní raibh mé riamh in ann a thuiscint cén fáth gur cuireadh deireadh le Coimisiún na Logainmneacha nuair nach raibh aon sábháil ann agus ní raibh an choimisiúin ag fáil aon íocaíocht. Bhí daoine le saineolas den scoth ag cur comhairle ar fáil don Stát saor in aisce. D’oibrigh sé go hiontach thar na blianta. Tá a fhios agam ar a laghad go bhfuiltear ag díriú ar an lincis dlí a cothaíodh ar mhaithe le dada.

Luaigh mé na bealaí atá ag lucht riaracháin cloí leis an dlí ach gan é a chomhlíonadh. Ceann de na samplaí is fearr ná pleanáil sa Ghaeltacht. San Acht Pleanála, caithfear suntas a thabhairt do chúrsaí teanga le linn pleanála sa Ghaeltacht. Mura ndéantar é sin, báfar na Gaeltachtaí, go mór mór iad siúd atá gar do chathracha móra, ar nós na Forbacha, an Spidéal agus Indreabhán, le scéimeanna tithíochta. Tá an-dochar déanta i mBearna agus Maigh Cuilinn. Tá cleas ag na comhairlí contae. Tá an rud céanna ar bun i gContae na Mí. Bhreathnaigh mise ar chead pleanála a tugadh i Ráth Chairn agus ar pháipéar breathnaíonn sé thar cionn, le 80% de na tithe coinnithe do Ghaeilgeoirí. Má éiríonn leo 80% Gaeilgeoirí a chur isteach ann beidh sé thar cionn, le daoine ag labhairt na Gaeilge gach chuile lá. Tá a fhios ag chuile dhuine sa Ghaeltacht go n-éireoidh le duine i dteist na Gaeilge sna comhairlí contae má tá an trí fhocal Gaeilge féin aige nó aici. Níl ann ach mugadh magadh. Ar an mbealach sin, tá an Ghaeltacht á scrios ag comhairlí contae agus na húdaráis phleanála ar fud na tíre. Caithfimid díriú ar an gceist seo agus cinntiú sa Bhille seo nó i mBille ón Aire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht. Má tá coinníoll Gaeilge ag baint le cead pleanála, caithfidh daoine atá ag cur isteach ar chead pleanála nó ag comhlíonadh an coinníoll, in eastát tithíochta mar shampla, caighdeán Gaeilge neamhspleách a bheith cruite acu, atá sách ard go bhféadfaidís a ngnó laethúil a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge.

Is í an Ghaeltacht atáimid ag iarraidh a chothú agus bhí go leor cainte anseo inniu faoin Ghaeltacht, tacaíocht don Ghaeltacht agus é seo agus í siúd a dhéanamh don Ghaeltacht. Tá an Ghaeltacht bheag agus leochaileach. Caithfimid an rud is bunúsaí a chosaint, sé sin, gan an pobal a bháigh, mar a tharlaigh i Ráth Chairn, an Spidéal agus mar sin de. Níl an oiread sin brú sa bhealach seo ar na Gaeltachtaí atá i bhfad amach, ach mura gcosnóimid iad ó bheith báite le slua mór daoine gan Gaeilge ar bith ag teacht isteach, agus iad in ainm is a bheith ag cloí le riail pleanála, beidh deireadh lenár n-iarrachtaí ar fad an Ghaeltacht a chosaint agus beifear ag caoineadh faoi céard a tharlaigh don Ghaeltacht.

Tá brú ar an nGhaeltacht ach ar bhealaí eile, ní raibh stádas nó céim níos airde riamh ag an

teanga i measc an phobail. Má bhreathnaímid siar 120 bliain, b'iad an mionlach a bhí ag tacú leis an nGaeilge ach tá go leor le déanamh agus ní cheart misneach a chailleadh. Caithfimid í a fheiceáil mar theanga náisiúnta, ní teanga pobal amháin tar éis chomh tábhachtach agus atá an Ghaeltacht. Is mar thobar na Gaeilge atá sí tábhachtach. Chomh maith leis sin, is díol suntais gur fhás líon na gcainteoirí laethúla Gaeilge taobh amuigh agus taobh istigh den Ghaeltacht idir an bhliain 2006 agus 2011. Ba i ndiaidh 2011, nuair a d'athraigh polasaí an Rialtais, a thit sé arís. Tá súil agam faoin Rialtas seo go bhfeicfimid fás uair amháin eile ar líon na gcainteoirí laethúla Gaeilge taobh istigh agus taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht.

Fuair mé físeán de bheirt gasúir atá sé bliain as an Astráil inniu. Dráma beag a bhí ann a bhí curtha ar fáil do thuismitheoirí i nGaeilge. Mar labhairt an Ghaeilge le gasúr, is cuma cén áit ar domhan a labhraíonn duine í leo, tabharfaidh siad í leo gan stró. An rud go gcaithfear a dhéanamh le gasúir ná an Ghaeilge a chur ina mbealach. Súfaidh siad suas í agus ansin beidh sí acu.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus leis an Aire Stáit. Chuala mé an méid a bhí le rá acu ní ba luaithe. Tá cúpla rud le rá agam le cur leis an méid a dúirt mo chomhghleacaithe, go háirithe an Teachta Ó Snodaigh. Ceann de na rudaí atá iontach deas ná go bhfuil Aire anseo agus muid ag plé le cúrsaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta. Ceann de na rudaí a bhí de dhíth i cónaí ná go mbeadh Aire ag an leibhéal Rialtais a bheadh ag plé leis na ceisteanna seo. Le blianta anuas ní raibh ann ach Aire Stáit, agus cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers.

Ceann de na rudaí nach bhfuil a fhios agamsa go fóill ná cé aige nó aici atá an chumhacht. Tá a fhios againn go n-aistrítear cumhachtaí ó Aire go Aire Stáit. An bhfuil sin déanta anseo? An bhfuil an chumhacht ag an Aire Stáit nó ag an Aire? An bhfuil an aistriú sin déanta, an bhfuil rún ann é sin a dhéanamh nó an bhfuil na cumhachtaí uilig ag an Aire? Is maith go mbeadh eolas againn air sin. Is maith an rud é freisin go bhfuil níos mó daoine ann le cuidiú leis sin agus ag cur béim ar chúrsaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta.

Tá go leor ráite nach bhfuil mé ag iarraidh dul siar air arís ach caithfidh mé a rá go gcuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht atá anseo ó thaobh an Bille de. Tá sé go deas go bhfuil go leor Gaeilge le cloisteáil againn san Seomra inniu agus caithfimid cur leis sin amach anseo gan dabht. Léiríonn an díospóireacht seo go bhfuil go leor Teachtaí in achan pháirtí atá ábalta a gcuid gnó a dhéanamh i nGaeilge. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an Teachta Ó Snodaigh ag iarraidh le blianta fada a chur chun tosaigh go mbeadh díospóireachtaí anseo i nGaeilge, go háirithe le linn Seachtain na Gaeilge. Ar an drochuair, rinneadh iarracht maith ar sin ag an tús ach ansin le cúpla bliain anuas tá sé ag éirí níos measa. Ba chóir dúinn níos mó a dhéanamh mar Dáil agus ceann de na coimhlintí a thug mé féin do dhaoine i nGhaeltacht Thír Chonaill ná go ndéanfainn iarracht níos mó úsáid a bhaint as an nGaeilge agus mé i mbun mo chuid oibre anseo sa Teach seo.

Níl dabht ar bith ann ach go bhfuil an Bille seo fíorthábhachtach. Chuala mé an Teachta Ó Cuív ag caint ar an am nuair a foilsíodh an Bille go raibh caint ann go raibh sé ró-láidir go raibh iarrachtaí ar bun cúlú a dhéanamh ar an Bhille. Tá a fhios agam, ó thaobh Sinn Féin de, nach sin an dearcadh a bhí againne. Ón chéad dul síos, bhí muid ag iarraidh i bhfad níos mó cearta agus níos mó iarracht a bheith ann sa Bhille oifigiúil. Bhí an Teachta Ó Snodaigh ag plé na ceisteanna sin go luath agus ag rá go gcaithfear an Bille seo a láidriú.

Táimid ag fanacht i bhfad ró-fhada leis an Bhille seo. Is deas an rud é go bhfuil sé againn

ach léiríonn an moill sin an easpa tábhachta a bhí ag baint leis an Bhille seo ó thaobh leibhéal Rialtas de le tamall maith anuas. Tá sé luaite ó a bhí 2011 ann go raibh leasuithe de dhíth. Tá sé trí bliana anois ó a bhí na ceannteidil againn. Níl a fhios agam an bhfuil Bille ar bith eile thart ar an Dáil a bhfuil muid ag fanacht an oiread ama sin fáchoinne. Tá sé againn agus is é sin an jab atá againn ná an Bille chomh láidir agus is féidir a bheith againn.

Mar duine a tógadh agus atá i mo chónaí i nGaoth Dobhair, tuigim an tábhacht atá ag baint le tacaíocht reachtúil a bheith ansin ó thaobh cearta na Gaeilge a láidriú agus an teanga labhartha a neartú. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go bhfuil cinneadh le déanamh ag achan duine agus ag an phobal an Ghaeilge a úsáid. Tá cinneadh le déanamh fosta ag leibhéal reachtúil ó thaobh na tacaíochtaí agus na cosaintí a chur i bhfeidhm ó thaobh na teanga de. Sin an obair a táimid i mbun inniu.

Tuigimid uilig na deacrachtaí atá sa Ghaeltacht. Tá an easpa infheistíochta, an imirce agus an laghdú atá tagtha ar deiseanna i gceantair Ghaeltachta le blianta anuas pléite anseo arís inniu agus le blianta fada. Tá mé féin ag déanamh réidh don cháinainéis Dé Máirt agus tá a fhios againn go bhfuil pacáiste de €12 billiún le caitheamh ag an Rialtas. Sin €12 billiún sa bhreis le caitheamh ag an Rialtas. Sin an pacáiste atá sé ag caint air fáchoinne 2021. Sin €12 billiún agus beidh le feiceáil cé mhéad milliún de sin a rachaidh isteach ó thaobh an Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht de. Má táimid dáiríre ó thaobh achan rud atá le cloisteáil againn sa Teach seo agus má táimid ag iarraidh go mbeidh an Ghaeilge mar theanga náisiúnta a labhraítear ní hamháin sa Ghaeltacht ach taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht, caithfidh muid an infheistíocht a dhéanamh fosta. Tá sé ceart agus cóir go bhfuil cosaintí reachtúla agus spriocanna agus a leithéid ann ach caithfear an infheistíocht a dhéanamh i gceantair Ghaeltachta agus sa Ghaeilge. Tá Conradh na Gaeilge ag tarraingt le chéile na grúpaí Gaeltachta agus Gaeilge ar fud na tíre le blianta fada anuas agus tá sé ag déanamh éileamh ar an Rialtas bliain i ndiaidh bliana ó thaobh an infheistíochta atá de dhíth. Ar an drochuair, nuair a thagann an cáinainéis, ní fheicimid an infheistíocht sin. Le cuidiú Dé, b'fhéidir gur seo an bhliain inar féidir linn é sin a dhéanamh.

Tá deacrachtaí faoi leith ó thaobh na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta de agus táimid ag feiceáil sin. Tá staidéar i ndiaidh staidéar foilsithe agus léiríonn siad cé chomh dona agus cé chomh deacair agus atá na fadhbanna. Tá dóchas agam agus ag Sinn Féin nach bhfuil deireadh tagtha le saol na Gaeltachta agus go bhfuil athbheochan agus ré úr i ndán don Ghaeltacht. Caithfear an ré úr seo an tacaíocht ceart a bheith aici ón Stát. Caithfear cuspóirí soiléire a bheith leagtha amach sa reachtaíocht seo. Caithfear plean dearfach a bheith curtha i gcrích leis na cuspóirí sin a bhaint amach. Sin an príomhrud. Caithfear plean a bheith ann fosta agus caithfear an plean sin a chur i gcrích.

Cím i mo cheantar go bhfuil teaghlaigh ag bogadh ar ais, giota ar ghiota isteach san áit arís. Tá siad ag iarraidh a gclanna a thógáil le Gaeilge ach ní bhíonn na seirbhísí Stáit ábalta tacú leo chomh maith agus go mba chóir dóibh. Níl sin maith go leor agus caithfidh aghaidh a thabhairt ar an fhadhb sin. Chonaic mé i mbliana go raibh turasóirí ag teacht chuig Ghaeltacht Thír Chonaill, chuig na Dúnaibh agus chuig cheantair ar nós Gleann Cholm Cille agus a leithéid. Caithfidh an Stát maoiniú agus pleananna cinnte a chur i bhfeidhm le húsáid na teanga a chur chun cinn sna ceantair sin. Bhí na turasóirí seo ag teacht ar mhaithe leis an Ghaeilge agus ar mhaithe leis an chultúr, chomh maith leis an áilleacht atá againn sa cheantar sin. Mar shampla, caidé an plean atá ann chun déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil na heagrais phobail sna Gaeltachtaí uilig ag cumarsáid agus ag obair le chéile? Sin ceann de na rudaí go gcaithfidh aghaidh a thabhairt air. Caidé an plean atá ann ó thaobh sin? Tá go leor eagrais ag déanamh obair ar ndóigh. Níl dabht ar bith fadúda sin.

Rinneadh sárobair leis na hoifigigh phleanála teanga ach an bhfuil plean ann? An bhfuil córas ceart ann le déanamh cinnte go bhfuil siad ag obair le chéile agus ag iarraidh na spriocanna céanna a bhaint amach ó thaobh na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta? Tacaím le reachtaíocht láidir agus soiléir a bhfuil fis aici chun saol na Gaeilge agus todhchaí na Gaeltachta a chinntiú. Sin an fáth a bhfuilim ag tacú leis na leasuithe atá luaite ag mo chomhghleacaí, Teachta Ó Snodaigh, agus an chuid eile.

Tá fadhbanna ansin agus tá siad luaite. Is maith an rud go bhfuil spriocdháta ann ach tá sé gan maith ar bith spriocdháta a chur i reachtaíocht agus ansin cumhacht a thabhairt don Aire é sin a chur siar. Is ionann é sin agus a rá ag tús an phlean nach síltear go n-oibreoidh é. Caithfidh an sprioc a bheith i bhfad níos mó ná 20% a bhaint amach. Caithfidh féachaint ar cad a tharlóidh ina dhiaidh sin. Cad é an chéad chéim eile - 30%, 40% nó 50%? Caithfidh dul i bhfad níos faide.

Labhair an Teachta Ó Cuív ar chosaint na Gaeltachta agus aontaím leis ach, ag deireadh an lae, más sin an t-aon rud atá á dhéanamh, tiocfaidh creimeadh ar an nGaeltacht. Ní féidir a bheith ag cosaint an t-am ar fad; caithfidh dul amach ag ionsaí agus níos mó tacaíochta a thabhairt don Ghaeilge. Ag caint le daoine sa Ghaeltacht agus le daoine atá ag feidhmiú ar son na Gaeilge, is léir go bhfuil íomhá nó smaoineamh acu go bhfuil siad i gcónaí ag iarraidh cosaint a dhéanamh ar ionsaithe atá á ndéanamh ar an nGaeilge agus ar an nGaeltacht. Táim ag caint ar chúrsaí pleanála agus ar déanamh cinnte go mbeidh coinníollacha pleanála i bhfeidhm. Is tábhachtach go mbíonn a leithéid de sin i bhfeidhm ach arís is cosaint é nuair a dhéantar cinnte go bhfuil an Ghaeilge ag 80% de lucht cónaithe eastát tithíochta agus go bhfuil siad in ann a n-obair a dhéanamh agus a teaghlaigh a thógáil i nGaeilge.

Caithfidh amharc ar an taobh eile de. Cén cineál tacaíochtaí breise a bhfuil muid chun tabhairt do dhaoine atá ag iarraidh cónaí a bheith orthu sa Ghaeltacht í féin? Nílím ag caint faoi chosaint a dhéanamh ar dhaoine le Béarla atá ag teacht isteach. Ceann de na deacrachtaí móra atá ag daoine atá tógtha le Gaeilge sna Gaeltachtaí, toisc gur ceantair iargúlta iad den chuid is mó, ná nach bhfuil aon rud i bpleananna forbartha ná infheistíochta na gcontaetha ó thaobh tús áite a thabhairt do dhaoine a bhfuil Gaeilge acu chun iad a bheith ábalta cónaí a bheith orthu ina gceantair féin agus cur le tobar na Gaeilge.

Luaigh mé rud sa dhíospóireacht dheiridh. Tá a fhios agam go raibh muid ag plé leis an Aire Stáit agus feidhmeannaigh na Roinne. Bhain sé leis na tacaíochtaí do ghrúpaí agus, go háirithe, don aos óg. Caithfidh cinntiú go bhfuil an teanga ag an aos óg agus go dtógann siad a gcuid clanna le Gaeilge nuair atá siad níos sine. Mar pháirt de sin, caithfidh earnáil a bheith againn ina bhfuil an t-aos óg ábalta am a chaitheadh i dóigh ina bhfuil an Ghaeilge thart orthu.

Is ceann de na rudaí atáimid ag iarraidh i gceantar Ghaoth Dobhair ná ionad buail-isteach don aos óg. Bhíomar ag comhoibriú leis an Aire Stáit a bhí ann cheana ina leith sin. Bhí cruinniú aige liom féin agus leis an iar-Theachta, Pat the Cope Gallagher, anseo i dTeach Laighean. Dúradh linn go mbeadh plean ann chun ionad óige nua a thógáil i gceantar Ghaoth Dobhair agus go raibh plean ann na milliúin euro a chaitheamh i gceantar Ghaoth Dobhair, ní hamháin ar ionad óige ach ar neart rud eile fosta. Bhí téarmaí tagartha ann do thuarascáil agus bhíomar páirteach leis sin. Rinne an Roinn Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta iad. Bhí Údarás na Gaeltachta i láthair. Ceapadh comhairleoir agus bhí moltóir ann. Bhí níos mó eolais de dhíth agus a leithéid de sin. Tá sé déanta anois leis na míonna agus níl a fhios ag an ngrúpa óige ina bhfuil mé páirteach, agus níl a fhios ag na daoine eile atá ag feidhmiú go deonach, cad atá sa tuairisc sin.



Bíonn an iar-Theachta Gallagher ag caint leis an Aire Stáit agus mar sin beidh a fhios aige go bhfuil sé fíorthábhachtach go gcomhoibredh an Rialtas agus an Stát le grúpaí sa Ghaeltacht atá ag iarraidh an rud is fearr a dhéanamh. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go mbíonn teagmháil, comhráite agus meas eatarthu. Tá an t-am caite anois. Ba chóir go n-inseodh an Stát dúinn cad atá sa tuairisc sin. An bhfuil plean ann anois le hionad óige nua a thógáil i gceantar Ghaith Dobhair? Moladh é sin sa staidéar cuimsitheach a rinneadh i nGaoth Dobhair níos mó ná deich mbliana ó shin. Tá sé ráite ag an aos óg féin gur sin an rud atá de dhíth orthu. Moladh é sa phlean a rinne coiste oireachtais. Tá sé molta i bplean Údarás na Gaeltachta agus ag óige na Gaeltachta go mbeadh ionad buail-isteach ansin. Tá sé mar pháirt den phlean 20 bliain don Ghaeilge. Tá sé ráite gur chóir go mbeadh ionad óige sa cheantar sin. Tá an staidéar déanta, tá an t-airgead caite, tá comhairleoir ceaptha, tá an tuairisc scríofa agus os comhair an Aire Stáit, ach níor inis éinne cad atá istigh ann ná an bhfuil fadhbanna ann. Ag deireadh an lae, níl muid, mar ghrúpa pobal, agus na grúpaí deonacha atá mar pháirt den togra seo ag iarraidh ach an rud is fearr do dhaoine óige agus do dhéagóirí sa dóigh is go dtig leo am a chaitheamh in earnáil ina bhfuil an Ghaeilge timpeall orthu. Cuideoidh sé sin leis an nGaeilge agus leis an aos óg. Ba mhaith liom é sin a rá. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil teagmháil á déanamh leis an Roinn. Molaim sin ach caithfidh a fheiceáil cad iad na moltaí atá ann sa phlean sin.

Is é an rud deireanach a luafaidh mé ná cúrsaí na n-oileán, go háirithe cúrsaí ar Thoraigh. Tá fadhb mhór maidir le Toraigh. Bhí seo pléite sa Dáil cúpla bliain ó shin. Bhí muintir Thoraí taobh amuigh de na geataí mar gheall ar fhadhbanna iompair isteach agus amach go dtí an t-oileán. Mar pháirt den réiteach, moladh go mbeidh bád gasta ansin. Rinne an Roinn é sin a chur amach chuig tender ach, ar an drochuair, tá cás cúirte ag dul ar aghaidh mar gheall air sin agus tá fadhb anois ag an Roinn an Conradh sin a bhronnadh. Mar gheall air sin, níl bád gasta anois ag dul isteach agus amach go Toraigh. Tá fadhbanna millteanacha ansin agus muid ag tabhairt aghaidh ar an ngeimhreadh. Caithfidh dóigh a fháil thart air seo. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil cás cúirte air sin ar siúl agus ní féidir baint a bheith againn leis sinn. Déanfaidh na breithiúna cinneadh ar an gceist sin amach anseo. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an t-airgead ann agus go bhfuil an Roinn sásta an Conradh sin a bhronnadh ar cibé duine a bhainfidh an tender amach ach tá fadhb fós ann. Tá sé ag dul ar aghaidh leis na blianta. Táim ag dul isteach ag an ngeimhreadh agus níl bád gasta ann. Ní hamháin é sin, ach níl an t-ingearán a théann amach go dtí an t-oileán ábalta an tseirbhís chéanna a chur ar fáil de réir na srianta Covid-19 atá i bhfeidhm. Caithfidh a bheith ag smaoineamh taobh amuigh den bhosca ó thaobh an dóigh inar féidir linn tacaíocht a thabhairt do phobal Gaeltachta atá seacht míle amach ó chósta Dhún na nGall agus nach bhfuil seirbhís bháid farantóireachta gasta acu agus ba chóir. Tá súil agam go mbeidh an tAire agus an tAire Stáit ábalta a gcloigne a chur le chéile. Táim ar fáil. Ní féidir liom labhairt ar son na dTeachtaí eile ó Dhún na nGall ach ceapaim go mbeidh siad ar fáil freisin. Caithfidh réiteach a fháil air seo. Ní fadhb í seo a chruthaigh an Rialtas ná an Freasúra ach tá fadhb ann agus, ag deireadh an lae, caithfidh réiteach a fháil uirthi.

**Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Gabhaim mo bhuíochas agus buíochas an Aire le gach Teachta le linn na díospóireachta inniu. Mar atá geallta sa chlár Rialtais, táthar ag iarraidh go mbeidh an Bille achtaithe roimh dheireadh na bliana agus gur Bhille níos láidre a bheidh ann.

Maidir le ceist an Teachta Doherty, beimid ag teagmháil leis chun an cheist seo a phlé. Beidh mé ag labhairt le Pat the Cope Gallagher freisin. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an cheist seo an-tábhachtach don Teachta agus do phobal na Gaeltachta i nDún na nGall.

Maidir le ceist eile a d'ardaigh an Teachta Doherty, níl an t-ordú a dhearna sé tagairt dó réidh

go fóill ach tá céimeanna glactha chun é sin a dhéanamh. É sin ráite, tuigim ón Aire go bhfuil spéis ar leith aici sna gnéithe dá cúraimí a bhaineann leis an nGaeilge agus leis an nGaeltacht agus go mbeidh sí lárnach san obair chun an clár Rialtais a chur i bhfeidhm mar a bhaineann sí leis an teanga.

Deimhním don Teachta Ó Snodaigh go mbeidh súil againn go mbeidh an Stát in ann seirbhís níos fearr a chur ar fáil i nGaeilge tar éis an mhéadaithe sin ar earcaíocht. Luaigh gach duine pointí an-mhaith. Tógfaidh mé féin agus an tAire gach rud ar bord. Luaim go háirithe na pointí luachmhara a d'ardaigh na Teachtaí Calleary, Ó Cathasaigh, Farrell, Doherty, Ó Cuív agus daoine eile. Beidh níos mó daoine sa Teach seo ag labhairt Gaeilge agus tá sé sin an-tábhachtach.

Tá cúpla nóiméad eile agam chun an Bille a phlé. An cáineadh is mó a tugadh ar an mBille nuair a foilsíodh é ná an easpa spriocdhátaí a bhí luaite do chuid de na beartais. Tá iarracht déanta dul ina ngleic leis an easpa sin anois trí na leasuithe a mholfaidh an Rialtas ar Chéim an Choiste. I mo chéad óráid, chuaigh mé trí na leasuithe agus tá a fhios agam go n-aontaíonn gach duine sa Teach seo fúthu. Beimid ag labhairt faoi na leasuithe eile sa choiste i gceann cúpla seachtain nó sa mhí seo chugainn. Tá súil agamsa agus an Aire go n-aontóidh Teachtaí liom nuair a deirim go bhfuil na leasuithe seo rithábhachtach don Ghaeilge agus go gcabhróidh siad an Ghaeilge a láidriú agus a neartú sa Státchóras, ionas go mbeidh seirbhísí Gaeilge d'ardchaighdeán ar fáil do phobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta. Molaim an Bille seo don Teach.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2019: Tarchur chuig Roghchoiste**

### **Official Languages (Amendment) Bill 2019: Referral to Select Committee**

**Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sports and the Gaeltacht, pursuant to Standing Orders 95(3)(a) and 181(1).

Question put and agreed to.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2020: Message from Select Committee**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** The Select Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sports and the Gaeltacht has completed its consideration of the following Further Revised Estimate for public services for the year ending 31 December 2020: Vote 33 — Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

*Sitting suspended at 5.13 p.m. and resumed at 5.33 p.m.*

## Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

### EU Regulations

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue matter for debate. This matter is of great concern to tens of thousands of people. I am glad the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Noonan, is here. He will recall that we discussed this proposed EU regulation in a Topical Issue debate on 16 July. During that debate, I requested that the Minister of State consult those who would be affected by the regulation, which proposes to ban the use of lead of gunshot bullets. On that occasion, Teachta Clarke also raised the issue of the presumption of guilt, which would be introduced by the regulation. She also referred to the definition of wetlands in the Ramsar Convention being intended for use at a global level, and not locally, regionally or nationally. The Minister of State acknowledged the challenge that the regulation would pose to farmers and gun owners. He also acknowledged the challenges presented by the Ramsar Convention definition, as well as the proposed buffer zones. People were reassured when the Minister of State acknowledged and accepted those concerns. On that occasion, the Minister of State stated: “While the Commission has proposed to progress this measure, I believe it is time we received some support on this matter.” He also told us he was “more than happy to meet with the lobby on this issue”.

After that exchange, I emailed the Minister of State to formally invite him to meet groups, such as the National Association of Regional Game Councils, NARGC, but I did not receive a response. On 3 September, Ireland voted in the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, REACH, committee to support this regulation. Despite several attempts to get clarification from the office of the Minister of State, it was only on 15 September, via a response to a parliamentary question that I had submitted, that we received confirmation that Ireland had voted to support this regulation. All the evidence suggests that the Irish position was changed at the direction of the Minister of State. If that is the case, I would consider it to be an act of bad faith, as would the thousands of farmers and gun owners who will be impacted.

I have no doubt we will now hear that all will be well and any issues arising will be handled during the transitional phase. I do not believe that will be the case. I fear that it is the intention of the Government to overcome the challenges posed by the Ramsar Convention definition of buffer zones by banning the sale and use of lead gunshot entirely. If that is not the intention, I invite the Minister of State to outline how it could possibly be workable to implement this regulation in Ireland.

I have a letter from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, as it was known, dating from June, stating that “the various issues raised by Ireland relating to a longer lead-in time for Member States without restrictions and issues surrounding buffer zones around wetlands do not appear to have been addressed by the Commission in the current draft of the regulation. Accordingly, Ireland is unable to support the current regulation in its current form, unless changes are made to address these concerns”. Will the Minister of State tell me what changes were made in the time since that letter was written? Was it simply the case that the position of the Minister of State changed and then the Government’s changed? People will be interested in hearing his response regarding this issue, especially since I have emails from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, from just days before the September vote, indicating that Ireland

would reiterate its concerns at the meeting on 3 September. How did this current draft differ from the previous version? On what date did Ireland formally change and reverse its position? Did the Minister of State intervene to sign us up to a position that will create substantial difficulties and costs for Irish farmers and game club members without any consultation?

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I thank Deputy Carthy for bringing this matter up today.

He is correct in saying that this issue was discussed as a Topical Issue matter on 16 July, when Deputies Carthy and Clarke raised this subject. It is good for us to be able to discuss it again today. I will update the House on the background to this issue. As I indicated in July, the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds, AEWA, was developed under the UN Convention on Migratory Species. Ireland signed up to the agreement in 2003 and it includes a commitment that “Parties shall endeavour to phase out the use of lead shot for hunting in wetlands as soon as possible in accordance with self-imposed and published timetables.” I am happy that Ireland’s position is to support the AEWA commitment to phase out the use of lead shot over wetlands.

Separately, and directly related to our discussion here this evening, the European Commission published a set of draft regulations in early 2019 for consideration by member states on the use of lead shot in and around wetlands. The draft regulation was discussed by member states at some meetings of the European committee on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, more commonly referred to as the REACH committee, as Deputy Carthy has said. Following discussions at a meeting of the REACH committee last June, the European Commission submitted a draft set of regulations for a vote by member states by written procedure.

The main proposals in the regulation involve a transitional period of 24 months for those member states banning the use of lead shot in guns in or around wetlands; for those member states with wetlands which exceed 20% of their territory, the transition time is extended to 36 months, provided member states also ban the purchase and use of lead shot in all their territory, not just on wetlands; fixed buffer zones of 100 m around wetlands where lead shot possession and shooting would be prohibited; and a definition of wetlands that is used in the Ramsar Convention.

As I indicated to the House in July, I support fully the underlying thrust of the regulation and I am committed to phasing out lead shot in wetlands, given that lead is clearly undesirable and can cause harm to the environment and water birds. Many member states have had restrictions on the use of lead gunshot in place for many years. Ireland, on the other hand, has had no restrictions at all. I know that we are not completely alone in that regard and that a small number of other member states also do not have restrictions, but we are in a minority. It is true that for those member states which have some national regulation already in place, many gun owners would have guns with non-lead shot ammunition and any transitional challenges to meet the requirements of the proposed regulations would thus be mitigated. In the case of Ireland, as we currently have no restriction, statutory or otherwise, on the use of lead in gunshot, the regulations would pose a challenge to us in implementing and properly enforcing a new regulation in 24 months in a situation where member states are more advanced than us with regard to national regulation. I understand that in Ireland, some farmers’ and hunters’ guns may not be capable of using lead shot substitutes and they may need to purchase new guns. In addition, the definition proposed to be used for wetlands is that defined under the Ramsar convention, that is, wetlands

of international importance, which includes peatlands, and this would cover relatively large areas around the country. These Ramsar areas are not currently all mapped and given the scale of wetlands in Ireland, this would take some time and, therefore, enforcement would present us with challenges.

My Department held consultations with interested parties including hunting and farming interests on this matter. While the Department has always supported the underlying thrust of the regulations and is committed to phasing out the use of lead shot in and around wetlands, it made a case for a longer lead-in time to deal with the transitional challenges which I have outlined and, in that regard, submitted documentation to the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, REACH, committee.

As the Deputy may recall from when we discussed this on 16 July, the Commission has proposed that a vote on the draft regulations was to be taken by written procedure on the day before our discussion but then decided to terminate that voting procedure. At the time of our previous discussion, we were awaiting further clarification from the Commission on how it intends to progress with this matter. Since then, the issue was discussed at a REACH meeting held on 3 September. Notwithstanding Ireland's reservations about the lead-in time, since we are committed to phasing out lead shot in and around wetlands, Ireland indicated at the meeting that we would support the draft regulation. A vote was taken at the meeting on the draft regulation and it was passed by the necessary majority of member states with Ireland voting to support the measure. The draft regulation will now be sent to the Council and European Parliament for scrutiny for a period of three months.

While we recognise that there will be some challenges to us relating to implementation if this proposed regulation becomes law, Ireland, like all member states, will have to rise to the challenge and we will do this in consultation with stakeholders. I am satisfied that the long-term implications of the regulation would be of benefit to Ireland, its citizens and the environment.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** That is bizarre. The Minister of State spent the bulk of his contribution reiterating the exact comments that he made during our previous debate, which outlined the concerns and challenges involved, then said that we will face down those challenges at a different stage. He mentioned the consultation with some of the organisations that have an interest in this. He did not state that the conversation took place after the vote, which is incredibly disappointing. The Green Party spent some time at its online conference asking why people in rural Ireland do not like it. Notwithstanding the suggestion from a Green Party Senator that it should just use smaller words, I can tell the Minister of State that it is actions, such as the one he has taken, that lead people in rural communities to think that his party is out of touch and deaf to their concerns.

The Minister of State was presented with a regulation. He was told that the regulation would create significant difficulties for farmers and game clubs, the very people who are needed to champion conservation measures and protect biodiversity. He was simply asked to ensure that the full consultation process would happen and take place with them before he supported the regulation, and he could not do it. I do not understand why that is the case.

He has made a decision that will put a significant burden on a number of gun holders. Will he commit to ensure that people who are out of pocket because they have to change or modify their guns will be compensated in full? Will he commit to consult with those people who will be affected by the implementation of the regulation? If he is, will he outline the process and



nature of that consultation? People will take a commitment to consult with a grain of salt. In recognition of where we have been up until this point, will the Minister of State outline the form of that consultation? Whatever needs to be done to protect our environment has to be done. All I am asking is that the people who are on the front line in protecting biodiversity and the environment are consulted before decisions that affect them are made. That is not too much to ask.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** As the Deputy said, I met representatives of the NARGC. It was after the vote on 3 September. I had a constructive meeting with them. There were difficulties but it was constructive. I recognise the conservation efforts and work that council members do around the country, including on grey partridge and other projects. They do fantastic work in that regard.

As a general principle, I am fully supportive of the proposals that led to the ban on the use of lead shot in and around wetlands, given the threats posed by lead in the environment. At the same time, I fully appreciate that there will be challenges for hunters and other gun users to overcome to meet the requirements of this draft regulation should it eventually be passed by the European Parliament. My Department has liaised directly with farming and hunting stakeholders over the past year or so and we are aware of the challenges involved. There will be challenges for Government in this as well. For example, the Commission's proposal for buffer zones of 100 m around wetlands is an added difficulty when trying to enforce any new restrictions.

In following up on a commitment that I gave to Deputies when we discussed the matter in July, I met members of NARGC which represents the interests of the hunters, and we had a useful and frank discussion on the issue. I will meet the Irish Farmers' Association separately, specifically about this.

My Department has argued at the REACH committee for a transition period of more than the two years proposed by the Commission, especially for member states that do not currently have any restrictions. My Department submitted written documentation to the REACH committee in that regard. As I indicated earlier, notwithstanding our reservations on the transition arrangement in the draft regulation, the Commission put the proposal to a vote without a revised transition period. Since we are committed to phasing out the use of lead shot in and around wetlands, which I strongly believe is the correct approach, Ireland voted in support of the draft regulation, which was passed by the necessary majority of member states, and would have been the case anyway. We were aware that the proposal would have been carried irrespective of how Ireland voted, given the level of support. In the circumstances, I believe Ireland took the correct decision to vote in favour to signal our support for protection of the environment and of health, not just for wild birds but for humans too.

I outlined my commitment to the Deputy again and I will continue to hold consultations with the relevant stakeholders to try to address those concerns. They are valid concerns and I want to try to address them in collaboration with the various stakeholders.

### **School Facilities**

**Deputy John Lahart:** I appreciate this being included on the Topical Issue agenda today. It is a local issue, especially in the parish of Ballyroan, where Sancta Maria College is located. I thank the Minister of State for her attendance to take the question. It is a serious issue.

As background, Sancta Maria College has a brand new building. It is barely open. It cost the taxpayer a lot of money. It is proud educational infrastructure in the heart of the community. It is an all girls school, serving the local community of Ballyroan, Ballyboden, Knocklyon, Firhouse and beyond. It was with great shock, given the efforts made by the Minister for Education and Skills, departmental officials, teachers on the ground, school staff, including caretaking staff, secretarial staff and ancillary staff, parents and children to get back to school and to ensure that the school community was up and running even with the severe restrictions and challenges posed by Covid, that the school found itself in a situation this week when the heating system broke down. Obviously these things happen but the school was then told it would be closed until next week. A consequence of this is that pupils returned home. It is of particular consequence and anxiety to students and their parents who are studying for the leaving certificate to be sent home and to lose time, having already lost three to four months of the school curriculum in the lead-up to the leaving certificate in 2021. They were then told that learning has to move online, which has proven satisfactory in some subject areas and unsatisfactory in others.

I raise this issue today as a matter of priority on their behalf. I hope the Minister of State will have news on funding to be provided, if necessary, to repair the heating system in a brand new school. She may also be able to give the community some information on how a system like this can break down so soon into its operation and lifespan. Will she give some kind of reassurance to the school community, and the students and parents in particular, on when normal operations will resume at Sancta Maria College?

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Foley, this provides me with the opportunity to outline the current position on the problems experienced by Sancta Maria College in Rathfarnham, which the Deputy alluded to earlier this week. A major building project has been under way at the Sancta Maria College since 2015, which is delivering major refurbishment works and an extension to the college.

As part of this project, the heating in the system was upgraded to bring it to a modern standard and some further works were also done to ensure any outstanding snags in the heating system would be done in the summer break of 2020. The main contractor for the contract, L&M Keating, returned to the site after the national Covid-19 shutdown of construction sites but progress has been extremely slow since the resumption. The main contractor ceased work in early July and has not returned to the site since.

I am not sure if the Deputy is aware but in recent days, the main contractor has applied for examinership, which has been granted on an interim basis. I understand it will be confirmed at a hearing in the High Court on 12 October 2020. My Department's building unit is aware of the problem with the heating system in the school and was told at lunchtime on Tuesday, 6 October, when the school emailed, seeking approval to appoint an engineering contractor to resolve the issues. That afternoon, the board of management at the school was authorised to have all necessary works carried out by the engineering contractor. This work has, therefore, been authorised outside the existing main construction contract in order that we can ensure, as the Deputy stated, that the heating systems can be brought back to full working order as quickly as possible.

He will be glad to hear that the school principal has informed my Department that the work to the heating system is scheduled to commence tomorrow, which is Friday, 9 October. It is anticipated the work will be completed in time for the school to reopen on Monday, 12 October. I hope that is seen as good news by the Deputy. If he has further questions, we can liaise on them.

**Deputy John Lahart:** That is good news for the school community and its parents and teachers. There is no point in labouring the issue. I am grateful for the comprehensive reply given by the Minister of State. It is very bad news to hear about the contractor, and that this was a cause for the school closing.

There is another matter, as blended learning has had to be used and there was an understandable lack of preparation because the school could not anticipate that it would have to move to online learning so quickly after resuming normal schooling. I am grateful to the Minister of State and her officials for supplying the information so quickly. I am also thankful that the funding was authorised for Sancta Maria College to proceed with the appointment of an engineering firm to address the problem as quickly as possible. Next Monday is as early as possible a date for this to be done in the circumstances. I ask the Minister of State to thank the officials in her Department for that.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** I will do so. The Department will continue to work with Sancta Maria College on all the other matters as well. I note the Deputy's comments on blended learning, and with Covid-19, the Department and the Minister are acutely aware of such matters. We must support schools where they find themselves in a position where the pupils cannot attend or buildings must close for whatever reason. It is something we are looking at on a daily basis.

*Sitting suspended at 5.55 p.m. and resumed at 6 p.m.*

### **Trade Union Representation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2018: Second Stage [Private Members]**

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I will be sharing my time with Deputy Louise O'Reilly. I am honoured to bring the Trade Union Representation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2018 before the Dáil this evening. Its purpose is to close a loophole in Irish law that has been exploited by some employers for many years. This has to do with collective bargaining and the way employers have an effective veto over who represents workers in matters of pay and conditions. This issue is of even more importance today in light of the effect Covid-19 is having on livelihoods and the nature of work itself. It is vital that trade unions are allowed to do their job and negotiate these issues on behalf of their members. That is not always the case under the State's voluntary system of industrial relations.

Just last month in Drogheda, both the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union, SIPTU, and Unite the Union were frozen out of negotiations by management at Premier Periclase. This dispute was not about a pay rise. It arose from the company's proposals to lay off some workers and put others on reduced hours while transferring work to non-union labour and retaining contractors on site. It was classic union-busting and workers had no choice but to take to the picket lines as management repeatedly refused to engage in talks at the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, in any meaningful way. Some four days into the strike the company issued letters to workers informing them that their long-standing collective agreement with SIPTU and Unite the Union was no longer valid. It refused to sit around the table with these unions at the WRC to resolve this matter while at the same time speaking to other unions and staff associations. Things have moved on and talks are now ongoing under new management, but the incident served to highlight the enormous power employers have in collective bargain-

ing. There are many other examples. Each highlights the need for the law to change so that trade unions finally have legal protection that ensures they can represent their members when collective bargaining takes place.

This Bill does three things. First, it enshrines in law a definition of an authorised trade union as a trade union in receipt of a negotiation licence. A negotiation licence is a licence issued by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation allowing a trade union to legally engage in industrial disputes. Second, the Bill introduces a definition of collective bargaining to the Trade Union Act 1941. Third, it provides that where a process of collective bargaining is in place, the right of employees to nominate an authorised trade union to negotiate on their behalf shall be recognised by the employer. In other words, when workers say they want a certain union to negotiate on their behalf their employer must accept that decision and get on with negotiations. This is an extremely simple and straightforward addition to the current law which will be of significant benefit to workers and their unions.

I will now say what the Bill does not do. It does not make it mandatory for employers to engage in collective bargaining. It does not force an employer to the negotiation table. However, where an employer is already engaged in collective bargaining with either staff associations or employee representative committees, the employer cannot then refuse to engage with a trade union if members want that union to represent them.

Under this Bill, an employer will no longer be able to discriminate against trade unions by choosing to engage with staff associations only and not with unions. An employer is still free to refuse to engage in collective bargaining, but under this Bill that refusal must apply across the board. An employer cannot veto the right of workers to representation by trade unions where negotiations are already ongoing. The right we are talking about here is the right to be heard. That is what we want to give trade unions and their members. This right exists in other EU countries, but such is the backwardness of our industrial relations system that even in the 21st century we are playing catch-up.

It is well known that our Constitution gives everyone the right to join a trade union, but the laws underpinning that right are so weak that it is not always possible for workers to exercise it. I will explain what I mean by that. Trade unions are not social clubs, although they have a social function. Their purpose is to allow workers to come together and bargain collectively with their employer for improvements in pay and conditions. If the right to join a union means anything, it means union members have the right to bargain collectively. Collective bargaining is based on a recognition of the fact that employer enjoys greater socioeconomic power than individual workers. Workers, therefore, need to act together to provide themselves collectively with sufficient power to bargain effectively with employers. The current situation is that although the Constitution gives workers the right to join a union and, by implication, the right to bargain collectively, the law that underpins that right makes recognition of that right by employers voluntary. That is obscene. It is not worth the paper on which it is written. It is like being told that one has the right to join a gym but not to use any of the equipment, or join a golf club but not play golf there, or bring a case to court but not choose one's lawyer. The fact that this has been allowed to stand for decades by Fianna Fáil and certain other parties is a sad commentary on those parties' time in government, but this is a moment when we can rectify that.

I call on the parties in government to support the Bill and allow it to progress to Committee Stage. If they have any legal or other issue with it, let us apply pre-legislative scrutiny to it. Let us trust the committee system and allow the committee to do its job. It is time to give workers

and trade unions the right to be heard. The current law states that workers have a legal right to be a member of a trade union and be represented by their union, but an employer does not have to recognise the union because there is no legal obligation on an employer to deal with a trade union for the purposes of negotiations on pay and work conditions. It is high time that law was changed. The Bill does nothing other than bring this State into line with the rest of the EU. There is no point in having a right that cannot be expressed.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I thank Teachta Munster for bringing the Bill before the House and facilitating this important discussion. It is timely that we are discussing organising, trade union membership and workers' rights because it is obvious to anyone who cares to look that this pandemic has shown up the way in which successive Governments have failed to safeguard workers' rights or ensure that workers' terms and conditions are protected.

Indeed, the terms and conditions of workers have been diluted over time. I refer to precarious work and zero hours contracts. When I was growing up, such practices were something we thought might happen in America or somewhere else far away. When Margaret Thatcher came to power, we thought that would be part of her agenda. However, we now have precarious contracts in the public service. Tutors, lecturers and nurses are hired but when they wish to turn up for work they are told to register with CPL or another agency. Direct employment is becoming less and less the norm.

It has never been more important for us to have a conversation about workers' rights because workers are facing the twin threats of the fallout from the pandemic, which we know will be substantial, and the threat of a no-deal Brexit. In a statement released this evening, SIPTU stated that the time is now for us to have that conversation about workers' rights.

I wish to be clear, because sometimes there can be some misunderstanding about these issues. It is not our job as Deputies to organise or bargain for workers or do the job of a recognised trade union but it is our job to create the conditions necessary for trade unions to organise and thrive. There is nothing to be feared from a well-organised and well-run trade union movement. We, as legislators, must create those conditions. We are not here to organise unions. Rather, our job is to allow them to get on with their work.

I would ask anyone who thinks there is something to be feared from the Bill two very simple questions. Are they afraid of decent wages? Are they terrified of fair practices in work? Those are the only reasons I can think of for opposing the Bill. If there are issues with the Bill that need to be teased out, the committee is the appropriate place for that to be done. The Bill can undergo pre-legislative scrutiny. It is extremely important that that be done and that engagement take place on the Bill.

Employers and their cheerleaders on the right tell us things such as workers want flexibility. In all my years as a trade union organiser, I never met a worker who wanted a precarious contract, but I often heard employers state that workers love precarious contracts as they do not wish to be tied down by a contract. The employers contended that workers do not want all of that; rather, they want the right to come and go as they please. All Members know that is simply not true and that it is anti-worker and anti-trade union rhetoric, but it has been allowed to grow. We need to challenge that.

The Bill is around strengthening the power of trade unions to organise and collectively bargain for their workers. Trade union organisation is a matter all Members should stand behind



and about which they should be concerned. Members are aware of the disputes on big State projects such as significant construction projects. I will not name the companies in question in the Chamber because some of them are run by people who are quite litigious. Deputies are aware there have been recognition disputes. The State is spending money on these projects but it is not safeguarding workers' rights. Surely that is wrong and is something we must tackle. Is there any reason not to include a social clause in State contracts? That is extremely important.

As Teachta Munster outlined, employers can simply walk away. The voluntarist system of industrial relations can and does work well in many instances but it does not always work well. When a boss can simply shrug his or her shoulders and decide not to turn up at the Workplace Relations Commission, there is very little power left for workers, apart from taking industrial action. The burden is on workers to do so.

There is a role for the State in ensuring that the conditions are created to facilitate union organising and a growth in trade union membership because there is no better defence for a worker. I do not think there is a worker in the State who thinks it is my job or the job of any other Deputy to go in and protect them at a workplace level, but there is no better defence against the race to the bottom than a union card. A union card is a worker's best weapon in that fight but we need to be able to create a strong, vibrant trade union movement. It is our job, as legislators, to facilitate that. It is the job of the unions to organise.

At a SIPTU conference I attended many years ago, Tony Woodley, the then general secretary of the Unite the Union, then known as the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union, stated that the choice for trade unions in Ireland is simple: they must ask themselves whether they are a partnership union or a fighting-back union. That is the conversation trade unions need to have with their members. They need to make the decision. The conversation for Members of this House is whether the Government is on the side of workers and workers' rights and whether it is willing to facilitate a strong and well-organised trade union movement. Will it stand up for workers? Will the Minister of State, Deputy English, use his voice and platform and his powers as Minister of State to vindicate and stand up for workers' rights?

I will conclude with this simple observation. During the debate on the leadership election within the Minister's party, the man who now leads that party spoke about wishing to bring in compulsory recognition of Labour Court recommendations such that they would be binding. We could spend all day debating the intention behind that statement, but I know a good old-fashioned Thatcherite strike ban when I hear one. To workers, I say to join their trade union and get active in it. To the Minister of State, I say that if his party wishes to lose its reputation as being anti-worker, it can do so by facilitating the passage of the Bill and by working with us to create the climate for workers to get organised, to be able to bargain and to have their rights at work vindicated.

**Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Damien English):** I thank Deputy Munster, the proposer of the Bill. I understand the motives behind it. We have had discussions here already in the past few weeks. I note the Deputy is prominent in flagging the issues affecting local business. It is not just that as in general, the Deputy wants to bring forward the discussion as well.

I listened carefully with interest to both Deputies Munster and O'Reilly. I note that the Bill introduced by both essentially proposes an expressed statutory right for trades unions to have their representative duties to their members recognised for collective bargaining and disciplin-

ary matters. It is proposed that this could be achieved primarily through an amendment to section 10 of the Trade Union Act 1941. The short Bill also proposes definitions of authorised trade unions and proposed that a new definition of collective bargaining be introduced to the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2001.

I am not supporting the Private Members' Bill for the following reasons. The approach to industrial relations in Ireland is one of volunteerism, whereby the law will not seek to impose an obligation or a solution on the parties to a dispute but will, where appropriate, assist them in arriving at a solution. There has been a consensus that the terms and conditions of employment that exceed the statutory provisions of workers shall in general be determined by the collective bargaining process between an employer and employers' association and one or more trade unions or staff associations. This process can cover the entire range of issues arising from the employment relationship and I believe that the trade union movement is very well protected by the Constitution and by our laws as well.

Contrary to Deputy O'Reilly's assertion, we have a strong trade union movement in this country. It is very effective. I am not sure why the Deputy thinks it is not.

Dispute resolution in Ireland is based on the structures created by the Industrial Relations Acts. It is based on the concept of the parties voluntarily seeking to resolve their differences with the machinery being provided by the State.

The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015 significantly changed the industrial relations landscape in Ireland. It reformed the law in respect of employees' rights to engage in collective bargaining so as to ensure Ireland's compliance with judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

The 2015 legislation provides a clear and balanced mechanism by which the fairness of the employment conditions of workers in their totality can be assessed in employments where collective bargaining does not take place and brings clarity and certainty for employers in terms of managing their workplaces in this respect.

The 2015 Act already provides a definition for collective bargaining as being voluntary engagements or negotiations between any employer or employers' organisation on the one hand and a trade union of workers or excepted body to which this Act applies on the other with the object of reaching agreement regarding working conditions or terms of employment or non-employment of workers.

The 2015 Act ensures that where an employer does not engage in collective bargaining, an effective framework now exists that allows a trade union to have the remuneration and terms and conditions of its members assessed against relevant comparators and determined in a binding way by the Labour Court.

The process in the 2015 Act is designed to be compliant with the Constitution. It has been established in several legal cases that the constitutional guarantee of the freedom of association does not guarantee workers the right to have their union recognised for the purpose of collective bargaining. The right of association does not place any requirement on an employer to recognise or negotiate with any union. The implication is that although there is a right to form unions, this does not have the corollary right to recognition, negotiation or representation. Engagement remains voluntary. That system has served us quite well in most cases in our history.

The freedom of association and the right to organise and bargain collectively, as set out in Article 40 of the Constitution, is guaranteed in a number of international instruments which the State has ratified and which it is, therefore, bound to uphold under international law. Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects the freedom of association, and this has been held to include the right to bargain collectively. To this end, as some Deputies may recall, the previous programme for Government contained a commitment to ensure that Irish law on employees' right to engage in collective bargaining is consistent with judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Accordingly, An Garda Síochána was granted access to the State's dispute resolution bodies, the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC and the Labour Court, in early 2020.

There is a limited right to representation arising out of international cases under the European Convention on Human Rights. It is arguable that this right is restricted to representation in individual grievance and disciplinary cases and does not extend to the right of negotiation on terms and conditions of employment. The Supreme Court has remained firm in its support for the individual right to disassociate as a corollary of the right to associate. The comments of Mr. Justice Geoghegan in a 2007 Supreme Court case, *Ryanair v. the Labour Court*, indicate that it may not be possible to enact legislation obliging employers to deal with trade unions, certainly not in the manner proposed in this Bill.

The Government will continue to protect the robust measures that have already been put in place to support collective bargaining with a volunteerist industrial relations framework, which has served the State well to date. We also intend to augment the existing protections by prioritising a series of reforms to improve workers' rights, including the introduction of statutory sick pay and a living wage.

I recognise that the Tánaiste has signalled - we discussed this in this Chamber yesterday, where the Seanad was sitting at the time - that he has already started that process to achieve the statutory sick pay scheme and has begun an engagement, through the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, with the relevant stakeholders, which will lead on to a more formal public consultation in November too. The Tánaiste is already acting in this area to progress conditions of work and protect the rights of workers. That is something to which the Tánaiste is strongly committed. Of course, members of the Opposition will argue that the Tánaiste is not but he will be proven by his actions. He has already taken swift action when it comes to introducing statutory sick pay, which we all recognise is an area that we need to make progress on.

For the reasons outlined above, I will not be supporting the proposal that the Bill be read a second time.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We now move into the list of speakers, each of whom has ten minutes but can share. It should be possible to accommodate everybody with a little imagination. Deputy Joan Collins is the first.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I welcome the Bill and thank Deputy Munster and Sinn Féin for bringing it forward.

There is a real need for robust workers' rights legislation in this country. Often legislation comes through, IBEC steps in the way and the Government goes its way and not the workers' way.

Last week, in a debate on child poverty, I spoke about the relevance of low pay in relation

to the high levels of poverty in society. One in every five workers is low paid. In some sectors, particularly in hospitality, the minimum wage has become the maximum wage and is the norm across the industry.

Two years ago, I was approached by a group of workers employed by the then newly-opened restaurant, The Ivy, in Dublin. These workers were being denied their tips. They had a contract of, say, €12.10 an hour. They were only getting paid the minimum wage and it was being topped up by the tips that the restaurant was taking from the customers. A small group of the workers joined the Unite the Union. The company refused to negotiate and then sacked the two workers who were the key advocates of joining the union. In a follow-up campaign, every restaurant, café and hotel in Dublin city centre was visited by activists. What we found was an interest by workers in unionisation and a campaign for a living wage but a real fear of speaking out, of standing up for their rights and joining the union. There is a reign of terror out there and Covid is not helping. Workers need a union to combat on their behalf. Covid-19 has already exposed the draconian conditions facing workers in meat factories. The Health and Safety Authority, HSA, does not have the resources, or, it seems, the inclination, to properly examine the conditions in meat factories or other problem workplaces.

I also raised the issue of two female workers in Spike Island Tours who have been working as seasonal workers on that tour for the past three years. They had not got toilet facilities or hand-washing facilities. They used the hotels and the cafés locally. When the pandemic hit and they returned to work, they still had no toilet or hand-washing facilities. They were told to use the tap on the pier to wash their hands by the board of Spike Island Tours. These workers had to get their union involved. They eventually got their toilet, and then they were sacked. The company first spoke to the union and then refused to talk to them until the two workers and other activists launched a major campaign to name and shame Cork County Council and the board. They eventually spoke to the union and they were reinstated. I support those workers in their struggle and fight for their jobs.

I also have been approached by driving instructors recently, who must go to Road Safety Authority, RSA, centres for their work. They are being locked out of the RSA centre. They cannot go in and use the bathrooms. They cannot use any hand-washing facilities. They cannot access a roof over their head against the elements. They have gone to the Road Safety Authority. They have gone to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who advised them to go to the HSA, which advised them to go to the RSA. They are still in the situation where they are standing outside their places of work in the cold and rain. They have joined Unite the Union to represent them. As yet, they have not had an opportunity to speak to the RSA.

Trade unions need a right of access for health and safety reasons to go into workplaces and speak with workers. This legislation would be a big step forward in assisting the trade union movement to organise. A strong unionised work force is the key to ending low pay and to ensuring good working conditions, good health and safety conditions and good environmental standards. I support the Bill.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** I thank the sponsors of the Bill, Deputies Munster and Cullinane. The right to collective bargaining and the right to union representation is and should be a pillar in any civilised society. The denial of such a right is the denial of freedom of association itself. However, this right does not come about easily. It was hard fought for in many countries, sometimes with violence as was the case in the Dublin Lock-out of 1913 or sometimes by peaceful means, but it is always at a supreme cost to working men and women such as the young South

African medical student, Steve Biko.

This fundamental principle brings about real, tangible change in workers' lives and working conditions. It protects vulnerable workers against unscrupulous and exploitive employers. I note recent examples of zero-hour contracts, 15-hour contracts and the recent magnanimous increase of the minimum wage by 10 cent an hour, which might purchase an extra sliced pan and a carton of milk at the end of the week.

There are 750,000 workers in the State on low wages. The importance of this Bill cannot be overstated. The Bill gives the labour force a strong hand in organising its future and in organising a decent wage capable of supporting and rearing a family. Surely that is something that any government would want for its people. I fully support the Bill and implore all parties and none to support it through the Oireachtas and give legislative empowerment to the working men and women of this country to choose their rightful representation through their chosen authorised trade unions.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** I thank Teachta Munster for bringing this Bill forward. The Covid crisis has opened many eyes as to whether their employers were one of the good, the bad or the ugly. At the start of the crisis, my office was inundated with inquiries from employees, some about the pandemic unemployment payment but many on employment law issues, which would have been better dealt with by union officials. This is a very simple Bill with one key objective, namely, to protect workers. We have all learned, from the experience of Debenhams workers, how rogue employers can behave. I have visited Debenhams workers in Newbridge several times. I commend them and their colleagues around the country on sticking to their principles.

The Government needs to intervene to help the Debenhams workers. Many members of the Government wrung their hands after the Clerys debacle and said never again, enough is enough, but here we are again. The Duffy Cahill report must be implemented immediately. The shopping centre in Newbridge, of which Debenhams was the flagship shop, is assisting strike-breaking by facilitating the removal of stock from the Debenhams store. Shame on those responsible.

The main aim of this Bill is to give statutory footing to allow unions to represent their members in collective bargaining, including grievance and disciplinary issues. Employment law case history show the consequences of disciplinary issues in particular can be far reaching. There is a strong constitutional protection to the ability to earn a living. We must provide the strongest possible protection in legislation to people's ability to earn a livelihood. Each one of us is entitled to that and this Bill is a great start.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I also welcome the Bill and thank its sponsors. It is timely because People Before Profit is putting a similar Bill before Stormont to repeal the anti-trade union legislation introduced by Maggie Thatcher many decades ago, which have been implemented by the Stormont regime. I welcome that as it gives us the sense that the same problems face workers all over Ireland, on both sides of the Border.

A war has been waged against working class people in this country for decades. It is often not overt - it is not the kind of thing that a person might see - but it is subtle and often dressed in language that seems to suggest otherwise. Partnership is often a word that is used, such as the social partnership model. It is a war nonetheless, and one side has been winning, namely, the employers and their backers in the State bodies and Government agencies directly responsible. The results of the war are seen in the headline rates and statistics of low pay, precarious



contracts, the lack of sick pay schemes and pension entitlements. They are seen in the decline in union membership over the years and the fact that a whole generation of workers entering the workforce has never known the very idea of a stable, pensionable, and secure employment. It is like a pipe dream for those workers. It is also evident in the poor provision of all our public services, the services that workers need, the provision of decent housing, a decent health service, proper public transport and so on. On the front line of this war is the ability of workers to join a union and have their employers negotiate with it. In this, the State pretends to be neutral - the Minister of State's response indicates that - but that neutrality contrives with employers to ensure the imbalance between the relationship of employer and employee remains. A legal right by a worker to have his or her union recognised by his or her employer would be an important step forward to correct that imbalance, to give workers the confidence to look for the things that previous generations enjoyed and are being stripped away from them, such as decent pay, decent pension rights, sick leave entitlements and dignity and respect at work. Another debate is to be had, albeit not in this forum, about the type of union we need and whether the ones we have are doing the job that is required.

I wish to raise two groups of workers who illustrate the point I am making very well. First, I raise the Debenhams workers. Yesterday, a High Court injunction was issued to KPMG, a global corporate conglomerate, which often provides assistance to this State and others for consultancy and other matters like the carrying out of insolvency procedures. That injunction has insulted those workers who will have been out on strike for six months tomorrow. They are workers who have put their lives and those of their families on hold to achieve their just rights. Other Deputies have spoken about the Duffy Cahill report. The previous Government, of which the Minister of State was a member, failed to implement it. Now 1,000 workers from Debenhams have been thrown on the scrapheap because of the Government's failure. Instead of the Government moving to tell KPMG, the liquidators, to give Debenhams workers the priority in order of creditors, every time it is raised in the House, the Government responds with more legalistic jargon to say that it cannot be done.

I will cite Kieran Wallace, who went to the High Court yesterday. He is a highly experienced, well-versed legal representative of KPMG, who is working on this job of liquidating Debenhams. He told us at a meeting a couple of months ago that what is required is for the Irish Government to instruct KPMG that it will step aside as the primary creditor in the list of creditors for the liquidation. The Government can do that and if it does so, then KPMG can push the workers up in that list of priority. The Government is refusing to do that and is trying to bamboozle Deputies and parties here with legalistic jargon that we are not in a position to prove wrong.

At this point, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions needs to step up to the plate and demand an immediate and urgent meeting with the Government to make these points. I remember well how in 2005, as will others of my vintage, nearly 80,000 to 100,000 workers took to the streets for an afternoon. They went on strike - but it was not called that, it was called a day of protest - to defend the rights of workers in Irish Ferries, to stop the race to the bottom. It was an incredible occasion. ICTU should think very strongly about doing something similar and while we cannot breach public health and safety guidelines, we could organise a few hours or a half-day strike to demand justice for the Debenhams workers.

I wish to refer to Ryanair, the notoriously and proudly anti-union company. Last year, it was forced to recognise unions across Europe. I have with me a letter from a group of Ryanair trade union representatives from approximately seven European countries. According to it,

eight workers were dismissed during their strikes - four union representatives and four cabin crew members. The base chief in Tenerife who was part of the strike committee was demoted in the afternoon after a mediation took place to avoid a strike. Three union representatives were dismissed in Prague. Cabin crews in Europe describe the “brilliant” model of Ryanair as being based on continuous disrespect for the most basic laws around union rights - an illegal model that is used to hire agency workers - as well as an ongoing atmosphere of threats to workers and poor working conditions.

Their question to us is how can Ryanair ask for state aid for its industry during Covid when it has used Irish labour law to employ workers in many countries and benefit from and take advantage of that market for 30 years. These are workers who are not based in Ireland, yet Ryanair cherry-picks the most beneficial laws and often ignores local laws in many countries. Now that Ryanair comes holding out its hand to the State, Ireland rewards it by appointing the former CEO of Malta Air, a subsidiary of Ryanair, as Aviation Regulator with the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA. The appointment of Mr. Diarmuid Ó Conghaile to the IAA is a disgrace.

I will finish by citing a famous clarion call for all workers: “An injury to one is an injury to all.” That call must ring for us all when we attempt to redress the imbalance between employer and worker in this country. The Bill deserves all our support.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We have 37 minutes left in the game and five Deputies offering. If everyone condenses his or her contribution a little, it will work. Next is Deputy Ó Laoghaire, whom I understand is sharing time with Deputy Cullinane.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Trade unions have shaped the modern world. They have brought us weekends, paid leave and protections of all kinds. They did so through the struggle and toil of thousands, including in this country. It is not the case that the trade union movement in Ireland or anywhere else is beyond criticism, but the fact remains that, anywhere one cares to look, strong trade unions and a high percentage of workers in them mean better pay, better conditions, more security and better standards. That is an objective fact, not only across the developed world, but everywhere. I urge people to join a union. Unions are undoubtedly imperfect and people may have frustrations with them, but a union offers protections and the chance of advancement along with fellow workers. There is power in a union. Of that there is no question.

Every country has its own labour history. At the heart of ours is the fundamental point of the right to join a union in and of itself and to be represented by same. Some 107 years ago, the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union, ITGWU, took to the streets of Dublin in opposition to Mr. William Martin Murphy’s locking union workers out and his attempt to blacklist them on the basis of not recognising them. It is ironic that when Larkin is now revered as a hero of Irish trade unionism, it is still acceptable and legal to ignore and not recognise a union chosen by workers to represent them and instead to negotiate only with associations that employers have set up themselves. These associations are basically yellow-pack unions. People might dispute that, but it is often the case. When any legislation establishing a structure is before the House, the question arises of whether the structure is truly independent and who appoints it. If a structure is set up by an employer, how can we be confident that it has the ability to oppose an employer independently and powerfully when the employer is choosing a course that is not favourable or fair to the workers? Employers’ associations are all well and good, but let us not kid ourselves. They are not trade unions or anything like them, and they are not capable of representing workers the way that unions are.

If an employer is engaging in collective bargaining, it should be obliged to engage with a legislatively recognised trade union with a permit for negotiating. There is no logical reason for an employer to be unable to do so, nor is there a good constitutional reason.

As matters stand, an employer can lock the gate against a rightly and legally constituted union in favour of its own structure. Our infrastructure for the enforcement of labour law is feeble. There have been issues with many employers down the years. I salute the workers in Ryanair who, over the course of many years, broke down its resistance to trade union recognition. That was a significant advancement and put workers in Ryanair in a much better position to fight for their rights. Many other employers in the retail, hospitality and financial sectors recognise staff associations but will not negotiate with trade unions. That is not good enough.

Under the Bill, the right of a trade union to represent its members for the purpose of collective bargaining shall be recognised by an employer, and where a worker declares that he or she wants a union to negotiate pay on his or her behalf, the employer will have to accept that decision and get on with the negotiations. It is perfectly reasonable.

There is also an obligation on the State. For example, the HSE is refusing to recognise the National Ambulance Service Representative Association branch of the Psychiatric Nurses Association of Ireland. This is based on the ludicrous argument that it is not a member of ICTU. That is the branch's right and entitlement, but it has a valid negotiating licence. There is no good reason that the HSE cannot negotiate with the union that workers, including ambulance drivers, paramedics and related staff, want to represent them. This situation needs to be addressed, as there is no good reason for the HSE to adopt such a position.

The Minister of State's objections do not stand up to much scrutiny. There is no constitutional or logical obstacle to the Bill. If an employer is happy to engage in collective bargaining, then why can it not be with a union, an organisation that is truly independent? Why should a union be excluded?

**Deputy David Cullinane:** As I have said time and again, the harsh reality is that Fine Gael represents a cosseted and privileged class. It is not just our perspective, as the facts speak for themselves. It will always put big banks ahead of struggling mortgage holders, the greedy landlord ahead of the hard-pressed rent payer, and an unscrupulous employer ahead of a disadvantaged and victimised worker. Over the past ten years, worker after worker has fought for his or her rights. In terms of legislation, what did the Government do after the Vita Cortex dispute in Cork? Nothing. After Waterford Crystal workers had to take the Government through the courts for their pension rights, no changes were made. Think of workers in La Senza, GAME and Clerys. The Government set up a review panel to consider what to do. We had to produce legislation, but the Government voted it down despite the fact that it was the Government's review panel that made those very recommendations. Recently, Debenhams workers have become the victims of a weakness in legislation and the base instincts of Fine Gael, which are Toryism and Thatcherism. Fine Gael will always side with big business, banks, landlords and unscrupulous employers against ordinary working people.

There is only one thing worse than a Tory Fine Gael Deputy, and that is a two-faced Fianna Fáil Deputy. Many Fianna Fáil Deputies have stood on picket lines with Debenhams workers in recent weeks. They had selfies taken with them. The same thing happened during the earlier Clerys dispute and many other disputes. They had the brass neck to turn up at those disputes time and again to give tea and sympathy only to enter this Chamber when legislation was pro-

posed and vote it down. That is the harsh reality of what Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have done.

Time and again, I have produced legislation, as has my party. In this instance, Deputy Munster has introduced a Bill to improve the lot of workers. Every time I come to the Chamber, I have some hope that Fine Gael will do something for workers, but every time there is a reason it cannot. The Minister of State referred to the voluntary system. This Bill would not change that. Rather, it would give someone the option to be represented by the trade union of his or her choice. That is all it does. Imagine if a party in this House were to say that someone could not have the right to be represented by a solicitor or barrister of his or her choice. There would be an uproar, yet the Minister of State and the Government believe it is okay for some workers not to be represented by a trade union of their choice. That beggars belief but it is only more of the same old, same old from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. I came to the conclusion a long time ago that the Minister of State's party represents a cosseted and privileged class. That is why I could never vote for Fine Gael and would never give the party a transfer on the ballot paper, because I know what side it is on. Politics is about division and choices and whose side one is on. I know what side the Minister of State's party is on. I am firmly of the view that nothing will change until we have a different type of government and a Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation like Deputy O'Reilly, who fought for workers' rights in the trade union movement for many years. Unless we have a Minister of her calibre, or one from among the progressive parties of the left in this House, we are never going to get the changes that are required for workers.

The Minister of State needs to explain to us in clearer language why he cannot support this Bill. The speech he gave tonight is the same speech I have been listening to for the past five or ten years. It is hollow. Some time ago, I brought forward a Bill - into which I had put a lot of effort, working with the Mandate trade union - which sought to address the issue of if-and-when contracts. I recall a similar response from the Minister of State's party in government at that time, namely, that it could not be done. However, in that instance, when the pressure was put on, something was eventually done, although it did not go far enough and was the typical half-baked response from Fine Gael. The party was shamed into acting, which is what happens all the time. Shame on the Minister of State and his party for letting workers down again by not supporting a fair and reasonable Bill that would improve their lot.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I advise Deputies that there are 37 minutes left, into which I must fit four remaining speakers, five minutes for the Minister of State to respond and ten minutes for the proposer to conclude the debate. I ask speakers to keep within their allocated time so that everybody can be accommodated. I call Deputy Gannon, who is sharing time with Deputy Ó Ríordáin.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** We in the Social Democrats support this Bill and we commend Deputy Munster on bringing it forward. It is timely and incredibly appropriate that we should be debating it today. I will use some of the short time available to me to acknowledge the passing away today of Fergus McCabe, a trade unionist, organiser and man of immense standing in Dublin's north inner city. If colleagues do not know him by name, they certainly will know him by his work. Fergus was one of the architects of the Gregory deal and was involved in every single organising capacity in the north inner city, right up to his recent involvement in the Mulvey report. I expect the Minister of State may have met him in that capacity. Fergus was involved in the founding of Belvedere Football Club. He developed, enhanced and brought to the fore the very idea of community organising. His work did not just have an impact in the north inner city but set a standard that was replicated throughout the country, in drugs task forces, community policing forums and in organising communities to stand up against the op-



pression of drugs and the indifference of the State. Fergus will be remembered by many people. He taught me and many others in the north inner city the ideals and concepts of collectivism. He encouraged us to educate ourselves, he was there when we needed to agitate and he was to the forefront whenever there was a requirement to organise. It is incredibly appropriate, during a debate on trade union rights and collectivism, that I get to pay tribute to the man who created many of the structures that have enhanced and fortified the community in which I grew up. I pay homage to Fergus McCabe. He will be remembered and carried in the hearts of everybody he helped and encouraged along the way.

Ireland has the second highest incidence of low pay in the EU, affecting 23% of workers in 2019. By contrast, last year also saw Ireland register the highest growth in domestic product in the Union for the third year in a row. Recent research by Oxfam indicates that Ireland has the fifth largest number of billionaires *per capita* in the world. These statistics are not unrelated to the fact that we have such a poor level of trade union rights. Rather than damaging our economic competitiveness, collective bargaining enhances it. Ireland is ranked 24th in the global competitive index, lagging behind countries such as Austria, Belgium, France, Denmark, The Netherlands and Finland, to name but a few, in which there are much higher levels of collective bargaining. Ireland is unusual in the European context in that employers are not legally obliged to engage with trade unions to negotiate pay agreements or other conditions of employment. This explains our much lower levels of collective bargaining coverage. We are simply way out of line with European norms in this area.

Article 40.6 of the Constitution sets out the right of citizens to form trade unions or associations. Unfortunately, this only protects an individual's right to join a trade union; it does not confer a right to be represented by one for collective bargaining purposes. The Social Democrats are proud to give our support to this Bill. We hope that it passes but, if not, we will continue to fight to ensure its provisions are enacted.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** It is refreshing that a number of Private Members' Bills and motions dealing with the issues we are discussing this evening have been put forward by Opposition parties and groups, including the Social Democrats, Sinn Féin, Solidarity-People Before Profit and the Labour Party. I have made a number of speeches on these issues in the House in recent months. That is to be welcomed. As previous speakers noted, there is a direct correlation between the fact that our economy is underpinned by poverty pay - with 23% of Irish workers on low pay, according to the OECD, and 40% of young people in insecure work - and the fact that collective bargaining regulations in this country give employers a veto. The current provisions have been described by the trade union movement as offering the possibility of joining a golf club without being allowed to play golf. I wish the Government would understand that there is a direct link between poverty pay, poor pay, exploitation and vulnerable work and the lack of trade union rights and collective bargaining rights. The two absolutely are linked and that is why we will continue to bring forward motions regarding sick pay, insecure work, poverty pay, low pay and collective bargaining.

The Minister of State's party leader became leader of Fine Gael on the strength of his view that the rights of essential workers to engage in industrial action should be restricted. Some time later, he is leading the cheering for those same workers when it has been proven how important they are. It is not necessary to have these adversarial, over-and-back debates in this House between Government and Opposition. We do not have to drive a wedge between us and play the pantomime villain and pantomime hero on the issue of workers' rights. What is at stake is extremely important. People in this country are going to work even if they are sick because



they are worried they will otherwise lose their jobs. We do not have statutory provisions in this country that other European countries take for granted. In fact, Ireland is one of only five European countries that does not offer statutory sick pay.

Even though it may be imperfect, we support the Bill that is before the House this evening. I know Ministers are handed scripts by civil servants or from the Attorney General's office that poke holes in things. The Government needs to understand that trade unionism is good for living standards and for business. It is good for the economy that workers are protected and empowered in their workplace. We cannot go back to an economic model under which too many workers are poorly paid and vulnerable.

Deputy Gannon spoke very eloquently in his tribute to Fergus McCabe. Given the issues we are debating, it was my intention, in coming to the Chamber, to speak about Fergus and his legacy. I have spent time in the north inner city and I know he was the type of man whose trust one would never want to lose. If one ever did lose the trust of somebody like Fergus, one would know one was doing something wrong. He had an interest in everything, including music and football. As Deputy Gannon noted, Fergus was one of the founding members of Belvedere Football Club and he was also a fan of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club. It would be wonderful if Matt Doherty, a former Belvedere footballer and current Spurs player, were to do the business tonight for the Republic of Ireland in Fergus's memory.

There was not a cause he ever gave up on. There was no individual he ever gave up on. He spoke passionately about the drugs issue for generations. He wrote the Gregory deal some 40 years ago and still spoke as passionately this year as he did in the early 1980s about housing, employment, drugs and education, as Deputy Gannon said, and always with a glint in his eye, always close to having a chuckle on his lips. Fergus was always articulate and forthright. It was his birthday this week. He was 71 years of age. It breaks my heart to think that we have lost so many good, decent and articulate people in that part of the world who were speaking to a better future. More recently, Fergus spent much time with young people from immigrant backgrounds, speaking to their reality and trying to find ways to empower them. It is appropriate, on a night like this, that the national Parliament would hear of the memory of Fergus McCabe. We will not get a chance to go to his funeral. We will not get a chance to say these words in a church or other place where normally we would do these things. When a person has worked so hard for those who needed him so much, for so many years, then Dáil Éireann is an appropriate place to speak of the name Fergus McCabe. I am delighted that Deputy Gary Gannon did so and I am delighted to join with the Deputy to pay tribute to him.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We can all empathise with the words just expressed. We all knew of his work and campaigning over the years. Our sympathies extend to his family and all of his friends.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I have said before that Covid-19 has highlighted the weaknesses we have in society, whether we are talking about housing, healthcare, workers' rights, or the ICU capacity we will need, and which we do not have at this point. From my perspective we are also dealing with the realities of the Border. I call on the Minister of State to bring again to Government the fact that there will be a need for an all-Ireland response in the very short term. We will also need to ensure that we have the supports that businesses, families and everyone require into the future. We do not know exactly what the future will hold with the pandemic. We have had a changing narrative in the last days.

I commend Deputy Munster on the Bill. Collective bargaining and union recognition is an absolute necessity. Deputy Munster has been absolutely to the fore with regard to the workers at Premier Periclase where we have an almost William Martin Murphy-esque busting of trade union-type operations. This Bill is what we need to give protections to workers.

In May in my town of Dundalk there was the announcement by National Pen of more than 170 job losses. The problem was that some of these jobs were actually being advertised on Tunisian websites before the job losses were announced. This is the reality that some workers have to deal with. As it relates to this Bill, those workers who dealt with management from the point of view of negotiating their exit were not allowed to be represented by union representatives. People were being dealt with on an individual basis. These were people who may not have been greatly experienced in negotiations and they were going up against an American multinational with a top-tier management team with years of experience. That is the disparity and the weakness. It is the David and Goliath. I call on the Government to see right by these workers and to give them that little step up and that little bit of protection. Otherwise, we will have what we have, which is the memory of William Martin Murphy in operation. We need those protections that have been fought for in the State, and long before the State was ever created, by the likes of Jim Larkin and James Connolly. That is what we need to see.

**Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Damien English):** I thank Deputy Imelda Munster and her team for putting forward the Bill and for the discussion around it. While I might not agree on the necessity for it, it is still no harm to have the discussion and to go through it.

It is wrong, however, to portray this Government, including my party and our role in the Government, as being against improvements in workers' rights and conditions. That is absolutely not the case. There is a consistent effort by Sinn Féin and other speakers to portray the Tánaiste, my party leader, as someone who does not believe in improving workers' rights when all his actions have proven the opposite to that.

The Tánaiste has consistently made the right progress when it comes to parental leave, parental benefits, illness benefit and the changes that were driven during his time as Minister for Social Protection and during his work as Taoiseach working with other Ministers for social protection. In the Tánaiste's first few weeks in the job in this Department he very clearly set out that the State's role would change when it comes to implementing a statutory sick pay scheme. All of us have called for it for years and we have all talked about it, but he has stepped up, is going to do it and has started the process.

This portrayal or some other impression of the Tánaiste is the wrong one. It is a dishonest one that Sinn Féin keeps peddling. The public will judge that and will recognise the Tánaiste for the work he is trying to do and the efforts he makes. I look forward to working with the Tánaiste on this agenda in the years ahead and we will make progress in improving workers' rights and conditions, while also recognising the balance and the importance of being able to create jobs and to have an environment in the State where jobs can be created and which attracts investment. It is about the balance.

Members of Sinn Féin repeatedly and consistently, and certainly Deputy Cullinane, try to portray my party as being on one side or the other, and we are not. We are about balance and working for people's rights in this country and for the public interest. As a party we have consistently proven that through all our history. The Acting Chairman, Deputy Durkan, would be

much better than I at portraying our party's history, but I can certainly say that when in government and on behalf of our party that is what we aim to do, and we work constantly to improve getting the balance right.

This constant thing that we are pro-landlord and against the tenant is not true. It is not borne out by work over the past four or five years, which I worked on with the former Ministers, Deputies Coveney and Eoghan Murphy, on the housing agenda. Nearly every piece of legislation we brought into the House was more pro-tenant than anything else, and tried to strengthen tenants' rights, and rightly so. Deputies should not come in here and tell me it is the opposite and that we are pro-landlord. That is not the case. Housing is a work in progress. I never claimed that it was completely fixed. It is certainly in a much improved space than it was four or five years ago, and is on the right track to being fixed permanently once and for all. That was led by a Fine Gael-led Government. This portrayal that we are against the tenant is not true. Repeatedly the accusation is made that we are against housing, social housing or affordable housing. Again, the track record does not prove that. Fine Gael brought the delivery of social housing to the highest it ever was in the State. This is on record and is proven. We were committed to it and we committed taxpayers' money to it. I recognise the taxpayers' role. It is their money and our job is to make sure it is spent in right way and under the right conditions. Of course we would like to do more but the constant portrayal that we are against that is not borne out by fact. People are beginning to see through that also and we will work on that.

With regard to banks, mortgage holders and protections for people's homes, I have listened for many years to claims that there was going to be tens of thousands of people shoved out of their houses by the banks. That did not happen because Fine Gael-led Governments did not let it happen. They put in place many protections to protect the family home for those who could not pay but wanted to pay and who made every effort. They were protected but consistently in here the opposite impression was given. The facts do not bear that out. This does not mean that there were not some sad cases that came through the courts, of course there were. I wish there was not. The portrayal that tens of thousands of people would be put out of their houses did not actually happen under our watch, because we did not let it.

The current Government and its programme for Government is committed to strengthening that position again for workers' rights. It is about getting that balance right because we also want investment and we want people to be able to get mortgages at the right price.

I would like to add to the comments on Fergus McCabe, who was well recognised for his role in Dublin's inner city. Most Members in the House would have known him and dealt with him. I extend my condolences to his family and friends and, importantly, to his community which he served for many years. I remember when he challenged the then leader of Fine Gael, former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, to really deliver long term for the north inner city. Enda Kenny responded to that with the Mulvey report, the implementation body and a commitment to long-term intervention. Fergus McCabe acknowledged that there were some short term improvements but he demanded there be medium and long term commitments too, and rightly so. That is now happening in the north inner city. I remember being at events and repeating that it was important that we did not just have two or three years of quick wins and that long-term intervention was needed. Fergus McCabe and many others have worked for that over a long number of years. I am not saying that the Mulvey report will solve everything but it certainly focused many Departments on an area that needed extra focus. Many have come into this House and called for similar approaches to be taken in other towns and villages, including Dundalk, Drogheda, Navan and elsewhere. That is what we are trying to do but Fergus McCabe

and many others led the way in terms of that work and were ahead of many people in terms of what they were calling for in their area.

Lastly, I am not sure what is behind it but there have been some veiled attacks here on our current unions and the work they are doing. Those unions have served our country quite well and I am not sure what Sinn Féin and others, including Deputy Bríd Smith, are at in that regard. They are trying to sneakily undermine the work of the unions. I am not sure of their agenda, and that is up to them, but I want to call it out for what it is. There have been veiled attacks on the unions by some in here tonight.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Not by Sinn Féin.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I am going just to nail this; there is nobody on the Sinn Féin benches that is anti-trade union.

**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy should check the speeches.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** The Minister of State is looking at a lifelong trade union activist.

**Deputy Damien English:** I know that. I did not name Deputy O'Reilly.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** My father was a full time trade union organiser and led a very strong union in this State. My grandmother was a shop steward with the Irish Women Worker's Union and my grandfather was a shop steward with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, ITGWU. The Irish trade union movement raised me. I came in here and one of the very firm agendas I have is to further workers' rights and to strengthen their rights.

**Deputy Damien English:** I do not doubt that for one moment. I did not refer to Deputy O'Reilly at all, to be clear.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** At every turn, we are met by Fine Gael which stops us. It is never the right time to legislate to facilitate trade union recognition. It is never the right time to legislate for people to have a right to their tips or for a decent increase for people on the minimum wage. When the Minister of State talks about balance, is he referring to €2,000 for Deputies and ten cent for low paid workers? Is that his idea of balance? That is not balance. We live in a very imbalanced society and we can see that clearly. One of the most shocking statistics arising from this pandemic is the fact that when tens of thousands of people were laid off from their jobs there was not a massive decrease in the tax take. What does that tell us? It tells us that people are not earning enough to pay tax. They are working all the hours God sends in the country that the Minister of State governs but they are not earning enough to pay tax. They are trying to keep body and soul together.

Sinn Féin says that Fine Gael is on the side of landlords because all of the evidence suggests that. We say that the Government is not on the side of workers because all the evidence suggests that too. We make no apologies to the Minister of State, to his leader or any member of his party or his Government for standing up for workers' rights. It is wrong to say that we have characterised trade unions as weak because we have not done so. There is no disputing the fact, however, that trade union density is declining and that suits the Minister of State, his Government and people on the right. It does not suit us and it does not suit workers so we will work to create the conditions to ensure that trade unions can organise and that the voluntarist system, where it does not work, is strengthened. We will also work to ensure that where there

are to be legal protections, those protections work in favour of working people. We will not apologise to the Minister of State, his leader or members of his party or his Government for doing that. We have been consistent; consistently on the side of workers and those who have been battered by the policies of this and previous Governments. The evidence is all around us. When the Minister of State goes outside he will see people racing to a drop-off with refrigerated bags on their backs. This is happening in modern Ireland - imagine that. People are racing to the next drop but they are entrepreneurs, they are self-employed. They can just download an app and will be like Michael O'Leary one day. They are starting their own one-man businesses. The Minister of State should look around him and see what is happening. We need strong trade unions and it is our job, as legislators, to create the conditions for trade unions to organise, not to organise for them.

Deputy Funchion and I are two of the few Deputies in this House who have worked with the Industrial Relations Act but if the Minister of State does not want to take our word for it, he should talk to the trade unions. They will tell him what they need. They will tell him where the Act needs to be strengthened. That is what we are doing; we have begun and are continuing the process of speaking directly to trade unions and workers. It is disingenuous to suggest that we came in here to attack trade unions or trade unionists because we have not, would not and do not. The Minister of State knows that and to suggest otherwise is extremely disingenuous. I would have expected it of other people in his party but not of him. My eyes are open now.

**Deputy Damien English:** I seem to have touched a nerve.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I thank the Deputies and parties that have signalled their support for this Bill. This legislation does nothing more than bring this State in line with other EU countries. There is a long tradition in this State of treating every single move towards improving workers' rights as the beginning of the end of Irish civilisation. The suggestion is always that the sky will fall in upon us and there will be economic chaos. The response is always overblown when it comes to anything that might, God forbid, help ordinary people to help themselves.

When one looks at every single social and economic crisis in this State over the past 80 years, one must ask how many have been caused by trade unions or by ordinary people. The answer is none. We stand here in 2020 in the middle of a whole series of crises. There are crises in housing, health, child support and crèches. There is a crisis in the provision of services for people with disabilities and of home care packages and home help hours. There is also a crisis in mental health service provision and the treatment of rural Ireland. On top of all of these is the Covid-19 crisis and this Government's scattergun approach. How many of these crises were caused by trade unions? Again, the answer is none. Our problem lies with this State and successive Governments bending over backwards for developers, landlords, tax avoiders and bankers who are allowed to do whatever they want while the rest of us suffer the consequences.

The truth is that no employer ever went broke by talking to trade unions. Support for this Bill would not cost the Government one cent of public money because this is a rights issue. The Minister of State knows that it is a rights issue and that it would not cost the Government a single cent to support this legislation. The fact that it is a rights issue is the reason the Government will not support it. Does the Government consider it important for ordinary workers to have the same rights as every other worker across the EU or does it want to continue to deny workers the right to have their employer recognise their union through collective bargaining negotiations? It is that simple and the Minister of State's answer tells us that the Government



wants to deny workers that right. The Minister of State seems to think that the Irish people do not keep abreast of the laws that the Government passes or the rights that it rejects but he is wrong because they do. Last February was a clear indication that they do pay attention to the laws the Government passes, the rights it grants and the rights it rejects. If ever there was an appetite for change, if last February told the Government anything, it should be to listen to the people. The people out there, workers and their families, clearly see that the Government is refusing tonight to give workers the same rights as other workers across the EU. To them, that sends a chilling message that the Government wants to keep workers down. There is no point in having a right that cannot be expressed. It is time the law was changed fully. Sometimes, it is good to give this Government the benefit of the doubt in the hope that it will actually do the right thing. As I said, it would not have cost one single cent to support them but the Government could not bring itself to do it. Why? It is because it is a rights issue, in particular a workers' rights issue. If it was bankers, developers, tax avoiders and landlords, the Government would be tripping over itself to say, "How can we help you? What can we do? What legislation can we bring in to assist you?"

The Minister of State said earlier the Government is working to improve rights. How can he seriously stand there and say that? It is costing the Government no money to support this but it would give workers the right to have their trade union involved and be recognised in collective bargaining. It would ensure that the employer recognised the right of a worker to say, "I want that trade union rep to represent me in my workplace." However, the Government cannot even bring itself to do that. It begrudges something that costs it nothing.

If people are watching in, they will just say it is the same old same old. The Government just does not have it in itself to stand up for workers. They are not on its radar. We know who is on its radar, but Irish workers and their rights to trade union representation, collective bargaining and ensure the employer recognises their rights is not on its radar. It would not help the big boys in business, would it?

Question put.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Tuesday, 13 September 2020.

*Sitting suspended at 7.23 p.m. and resumed at 7.43 p.m.*

### **Covid-19: Statements**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Táimid chun déileáil le hUimh. 12a, ráiteas ón Aire Sláinte agus ceisteanna agus freagraí maidir le Covid-19. It is becoming something of a habit to be here late on a Thursday evening, addressing important matters. Let us hope this will be the last occasion on which we will have to do something like this on a Thursday evening. The Minister is very welcome. It is good to have him here with us and we are looking forward to hearing his contribution. The Minister has ten minutes, after which the other Members contributing will have the opportunity to make statements, ask questions or both.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As colleagues will be aware, on Monday the Government made the decision that the entire country should move to level 3 of the Covid framework plan. This came into effect at midnight on Tuesday for three weeks. The

decision was not made lightly. I am acutely aware of the costs of these decisions to individuals, families, communities and businesses.

The level 3 measures in place are the same as those in place in Donegal and very similar to those put in place in Kildare, Laois and Offaly in August. I will now outline the measures under level 3 of the framework. People may meet up with no more than six others from one other household. A maximum of 25 guests are allowed at weddings. There are to be no indoor organised events although gatherings of up to 15 for outdoor events are allowed. Groups of up to 15 may engage in outdoor non-contact training and individual training is allowed indoors. No matches or other sporting events may be held with the exception of professional, elite and intercounty sports, club championships and horse racing. All must be held behind closed doors. Individual training in gyms, pools and leisure centres is allowed.

Religious services are to move online and up to 25 people may attend at a funeral. There is to be no indoor dining or service in restaurants or pubs while up to 15 may be served outdoors. The one exception to this is wet pubs in Dublin, which are to remain closed. Hotels, guest-houses and bed and breakfast accommodation must limit services to residents. Indoor cultural venues are closed.

People should attend work only if absolutely necessary and work from home where possible. People should stay within their own counties except for work, education and other essential purposes. Public transport should only be used when necessary. Schools, colleges and childcare facilities are to remain open. Healthcare facilities also remain open. Visiting in care homes is suspended except in critical and compassionate circumstances.

These are difficult measures to follow. For a number of weeks in August, the people of Kildare, Laois and Offaly lived with a set of measures very similar to those under level 3. This was not easy but because of their work, commitment, solidarity and determination, Covid-19 was pushed right back down in these counties. The people of Donegal and Dublin have been living with level 3 measures for several weeks and they too will attest to these measures being difficult. It is too early for the measures to have reduced the number of identified positive cases in Donegal but we are seeing an impact in Dublin, where the growth rate of cases has been brought right down.

The Government and agencies across the State are acting in many other ways in response to Covid as well. Additional funding has been sanctioned for An Garda Síochána to support enforcement. Testing and tracing is being further strengthened. Additional technologies, including antigen testing, are being examined. Remote learning is being increased for higher education. Additional business supports have been introduced and additional funding for nursing homes has been sanctioned. We have launched a €600 million winter plan to help protect patients and our health services. This plan includes funding for approximately 900 hospital or acute beds, 500 sub-acute beds, 5 million home care hours and much more. We are doubling the public health workforce. The Government has followed much of the advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, including the framework itself, the recommendations for additional enforcement, the recommendations for additional inspections and communications and, indeed, the recommendation to increase nationally from the level we were at. Colleagues will be aware that while the Government decided to move to level 3, NPHET recommended moving to level 5.

Correspondence from and public statements by most political parties are in line with the de-

cision by the Government not to move to level 5 from midnight on Monday last. The Government believed that the conditions in the framework for moving to level 5 had not all been met. Three days earlier, which was the Thursday, NPHET had met and advised the Government to keep Dublin and Donegal at level 3, and the rest of the country at level 2.

The HSE confirmed to the Government that it has sufficient capacity to manage existing cases of Covid-19 and it is not projecting any immediate difficulties in this respect. The Government would also like to see more detail on options for the end of a four-week period at level 5. In its decision, the Government considered the health, social and economic consequences of a move to level 5 at this time. We noted that Israel is the only country currently following such a strategy. We concluded that the best way forward was to follow the advice from NPHET on enforcement, communications, and increasing nationally the framework level, and to do so at level 3 rather than level 5.

Countries across Europe are seeing an increase in cases, and these countries are also taking action. Ireland is currently mid-table in Europe. European countries with higher rates include Spain, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Denmark. As colleagues will be aware, cases are rising fast in Northern Ireland. We are in communication at official and political levels on how best to co-ordinate our responses on the island of Ireland.

There has been discussion today about the chronology of events over the weekend. I received a text message around lunchtime on Saturday from the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, to say he had called a meeting of NPHET for the following day. I texted the Taoiseach to let him know. Early Sunday morning, I texted the CMO requesting a call before NPHET met. On the back of that, the CMO and I spoke. We discussed the current situation and the possibility of moving to level 4. I conveyed my belief that it was important that NPHET adhere to the parameters set out in the framework for each level. I contacted the Taoiseach afterwards. Around 7 p.m., I took part in a video call with the CMO, the deputy CMO and the Secretary General. That is when I was informed of NPHET's recommendation to move to level 5. I updated the Taoiseach after that call. A Cabinet Covid-19 committee was convened for noon the following day, and the Cabinet also met later on that Monday.

I would like to provide my colleagues with an update on the epidemiology. As of today, the 14-day prevalence rate per 100,000 of the population is 128. Just two weeks ago, it was 76. Counties with the highest rates now are Donegal at 319, Monaghan at 257, Clare at 183, Longford at 169 and Roscommon at 166. A total of 506 cases were notified today, with 35% coming from a close contact of a confirmed case. A total of 492 new clusters were notified in the past week, to 3 October. The latest estimate, calculated yesterday, for the R-nought number is 1.2. It is important to note that regardless of what level Ireland had moved to this week, case numbers and hospitalisations would continue to rise for several weeks. This is because it takes several weeks for the measures to impact on confirmed cases and hospitalisations.

We now have the opportunity to arrest the spread of Covid-19 throughout our country. This means all of us must follow the measures in the framework. It means following the basics of hand washing, face coverings and social distancing. It means reducing our contacts. Earlier this year, we flattened the curve right across Ireland. In August, the people of Kildare, Laois and Offaly did the same. Right now, people in Dublin and Donegal are working hard to do it again. Our request is that, once more, we all step up, we all follow the measures, and we suppress this virus. I believe that, once again, we will be more than up to the challenge.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister for his contribution. I call Deputy Cullinane. Is the Deputy making a statement or going back and forth with questions?

**Deputy David Cullinane:** It will be a combination of both. When I put a question to the Minister, I will give him time to respond. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for clarifying that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is fine, and I thank Deputy Cullinane.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The Minister had a telephone call with the CMO last Sunday. I am assuming that call was not about the sporting events that took place the day before. That call was about the CMO's serious concerns regarding the spread of Covid-19, his deep concerns about the contraction of the virus and the number of cases throughout the State.

For the first time, today in the Dáil, we have learned that on that phone call the CMO and the Minister did have a discussion regarding added restrictions. What the Minister said is that he and CMO talked about the possibility of moving to level 4. That is the first time I have been made aware of that fact, and I assume that it is the first time that people in this House have made aware of it as well.

I would like to ask the Minister to respond briefly to my questions. When the CMO put it to him that he was so concerned that he might recommend going up one level or more, was there any pushback from the Minister? Did the Minister say to the CMO at that stage that that would be unacceptable or problematic? Did the CMO have any sense that doing that would be a difficulty or a challenge for the Government? I ask that because the impression that was given for 48 hours after that phone call was that NPHET had gone on a solo run and had bounced the Government. From the Minister's statement tonight, it clearly looks like that was not the case.

In fact, the Minister went on to state that in his response to the CMO he asked that NPHET stick to the parameters set out in the framework for each level. The Government's plan and the framework allows for five levels. Did the Minister, therefore, at any time during that call on Sunday morning, before the NPHET meeting, say to the CMO, when there was talk of added restrictions, that that was going to be a big difficulty for the Government? Following that phone call on Sunday morning, did the Minister inform the Taoiseach of that call? Did he inform the Taoiseach that there was a discussion in the call about added restrictions and the possibility that NPHET might recommend going to level 4 or level 5? I will give the Minister a minute to respond to those questions.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Cullinane cannot decide what length of time that the Minister is going to have. I call the Minister.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank Deputy Cullinane. The only person whom I have heard suggest that NPHET was going on a solo run is Deputy Cullinane, right now. I have never used that language. I do not know who has used that language. The only person whom I have heard make that suggestion is the Deputy. That is the only time that I have heard that language.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Was that not-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister without interruption, please.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I have not suggested that, nor would it be proper for me to make such suggestions. The meeting of NPHET was convened by the CMO on Sunday, out of the normal cycle of NPHET meetings on Thursdays, something which the acting CMO had

done from time to time when the CMO was away. That is what the CMO did, and he was absolutely within his rights to do that. Indeed, if he chooses to convene NPHET again this Saturday, Sunday or Monday, that would be his right. Nobody tries to influence when NPHET meets other than the CMO and NPHET itself.

I outlined what the CMO and I discussed. Did I try to influence the recommendations coming from NPHET? Of course I did not. I would never have done such a thing.

NPHET's job is to provide the best public health advice it can to the Government. While the Government ultimately agreed to move up the levels and implement various other recommendations NPHET came up with on Sunday, we did not move to level 5. We moved to level 3, and we believe that is the best option for the country.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The problem is that the Minister himself admitted that he did not see the interview with the Tánaiste on RTÉ, where the Tánaiste very clearly pushed back against the CMO and gave the impression that the Government was bounced and  
8 o'clock that the first it heard of added restrictions was when it received that letter from the CMO. The Minister is now telling the Dáil that on Sunday, before NPHET met, there was a discussion about going to level 4 and possibly further. The Minister says he did not try to influence NPHET, which is right, but the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste said that they were caught on the hop and that the first they heard of it was when they received the letter after the meeting on Sunday. That is patently untrue. The fact of the matter is that the CMO did everything possible, as far as I can see, by relaying the information to the Minister for Health, being very clear about the situation of the spread of the virus, and talking to the Minister about the possibility of added restrictions. Yet the following day, on national television, the Tánaiste talked about being bounced. Today in this Chamber he said, in response to my colleague Deputy Doherty, that he had no inkling about added restrictions until he got a briefing after the NPHET meeting. That is clearly not the case.

The Minister did not answer the question I put to him. When he and the CMO had the discussion on Sunday morning, prior to the NPHET meeting, and talked about added restrictions and the possibility of going to level 4, did he relay that information to the Taoiseach at that point and was it given to the Tánaiste? When we had all the controversy surrounding the Tánaiste's interview on RTÉ and the perception that NPHET went on a solo run ahead of the Government and had not briefed it on what it was doing, why did the Minister not put these telephone calls with the CMO into the public domain for 24 hours? We are only hearing today in the Chamber that the Minister did have a discussion about added restrictions. That was a failure on the Minister's part and a fracture has occurred over recent days between the Government and public health officials because of the mishandling of the situation. Reference has been made to there being poor communication between the Government, the CMO and NPHET, but it strikes me that that was not the case. The poor communication was on the Government's side, between the Minister and the Taoiseach, the Minister and the Tánaiste and the Minister and his partners in government. Will he answer the question I have put to him? On Sunday morning when the Minister received that call and had a discussion about the added restrictions, which were a possibility coming from that NPHET meeting, did he have a conversation with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste about that possibility?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before the Minister responds, I want to be clear that the Minister has a responsibility for who he spoke to but he cannot reasonably be expected to respond to the House in respect of who spoke to somebody else. We do not operate on the basis of "dúirt bean



liom go ndúirt bean léi”.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will answer the Deputy’s question in full. I think I did so in my speech but I will do so again. However, it strikes me that this session was booked for several days and it was agreed on Tuesday to talk about the fact that the country has just moved to level 3. Some people, for the past few days, have had no jobs. People have had to close down their businesses. I would have imagined that the Deputy would be interested in a conversation in our Parliament about what we were doing about that and what supports were in place. It is interesting that the Deputy has used his full ten minutes to misrepresent an invented division between NPHET and the Government.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister should answer the question. Did he brief the Taoiseach? That is what the Deputy asked.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The Minister is wasting my time. He should answer the question he was asked.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** As I said in my statement, after I spoke to the CMO, the Taoiseach and I spoke. After speaking with the CMO after the NPHET meeting, which was the second time I spoke to him that day and was the first time level 5 had ever been mentioned to me or anyone else in the Government, I then spoke to the Taoiseach that evening.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Did the Minister tell the Taoiseach about the level of restrictions? He did not answer my question.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister answered very clearly. The Deputy asked if he briefed the Taoiseach, and the Minister said that he did.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Today, the WHO announced an additional 338,000 Covid-19 infections worldwide, which is the single greatest one-day increase in the virus since it came to be less than a year ago. We are living under very serious level 3 designations throughout this country and have been living with them in Dublin and Donegal for some time. There are serious restrictions in place and we understand that. Paul Reid was on the “Six One” news tonight and NPHET, the Government and the HSE are all in agreement that this is a time of great concern. The public are also greatly concerned. Since cases started to creep back up in mid-August, there has been a sense of impending doom and dread that we are being pulled back towards a number of cases that will lead our health service into real distress, if not crisis. Many people have been tested and many have been found to be positive. People have again started to die in increasing numbers. Yet here we are at the last knockings of a weekly Dáil sitting, discussing the fallout from yet another episode of absolute calamity based on the failing or flawed relationships at the top of our Government. We are partaking in some kind of Agatha Christie type mystery as to who said what, when, to who and why.

As I was preparing for this debate today, I wondered whether we needed to discuss this because my constituents, family and friends are all looking forward and asking where are we going next. However, we need to discuss what happened last weekend and get some answers because it will have massive implications for the confidence the people have in the Minister, NPHET, the Taoiseach, and the Tánaiste, who I believe has played a particularly foul role in this sad mini-affair in the midst of this awful crisis. The credibility of those at the peak of the Government is at stake.

In the Minister's statement, he said he received a text from the CMO around lunchtime on Saturday saying he was calling a meeting for Sunday. The Minister then texted the Taoiseach. However, he did not call the CMO until Sunday morning. He says it is not unusual for NPHET to call unscheduled meetings but this was Tony Holohan, coming back to work two days early. He is a titan of this pandemic who has more trust from the public than all of us in this Chamber, present or absent, put together. He was coming back and he was calling a meeting. Why did the Minister of State not call him on Saturday? My inclination would have been to pick up the phone and have a conversation with him. It sounds like the Minister got that text and texted the Taoiseach. That might seem a relatively minor thing but it is an important point. Then, late Sunday afternoon or in the evening, the Minister was informed through videoconference that NPHET was recommending level 5. When did the Minister see this infamous letter? Was it before, during, or after that video call? It was the leaking of that letter that caused absolute panic among the public, as whoever leaked it should have known.

In a press conference today, the Taoiseach gave the Minister the dreaded vote of confidence. We all know what that means in a sporting framework. He also said, as regards the leaking of this letter, that NPHET is a large committee made up of many people. He basically said that someone from NPHET leaked the letter. NPHET is a wide committee with many people on it, which is why I believe that not many people on NPHET would have seen that letter. There is no way, in that time, that that letter was drafted and circulated to more than 40 people for approval before it got to the Minister. That is just not credible. That letter would have been drafted by the CMO and perhaps one or two other people and sent to the Minister and perhaps his senior staff. Does the Minister share the Taoiseach's belief that this was leaked from NPHET? If so, given the gravity of this leak, is an investigation under way to find out who leaked it? If not, why not? Does the Minister disagree with the Taoiseach and have a different view? Is he willing to state categorically that the leak did not come from his side of the desk?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will answer the Deputy's questions in full. He described what happened over the weekend as an absolute calamity. It is important that the Irish people hear a different response to that, if I may. NPHET met on Thursday and made a recommendation to Government to stay at level 2. On Saturday, the Chief Medical Officer was talking to various people. He decided to call NPHET together on Sunday. He informed me and I informed the Taoiseach. The Chief Medical Officer and I spoke before the meeting. I spoke to him on Sunday rather than Saturday because he had more information on Sunday. When he texted me at around lunchtime on Saturday, the numbers for the day were not in. I was going to talk to him and was better off waiting until he had as much information as possible. The Chief Medical Officer and I spoke. As soon as we spoke, I informed the Taoiseach. NPHET met for many hours. Afterwards, it informed me and we had a long, detailed discussion about the recommendation and why it was made. After that, I informed the Taoiseach. The next morning, the Cabinet Covid committee met. Cabinet met later that day.

We need to be careful with our words because we are asking the Irish people to make many sacrifices to suppress this virus, and I respectfully suggest to the Deputy that the sequence of events I have laid out are a reasonable account of Government and public health teams working through difficult issues over the weekend, at pace, and coming to reasoned conclusions on them. I suggest that that is a more reasonable view of what happened. The Deputy's first question was why I spoke to him on Sunday and I have answered that. I can find out for the Deputy when I saw the letter. It would have been emailed to my private secretary. The Chief Medical Officer, the deputy chief medical officer, the Secretary General and I spoke by video call at

approximately 7 p.m., at some length. The letter is a written account of the recommendation. We talked through all of that. I can find out when exactly that letter arrived in my inbox but I imagine it was some time late on Sunday night.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** My main question is about the leak. Who leaked it? The Taoiseach indicated today that he believed it came from NPHET. Is there an investigation to find this out? We will have many more moments in this pandemic where decisions will have to be made by the Minister, the Taoiseach, the CMO and NPHET. Whatever the Minister says about the word “calamity”, it felt like that over the course of those few days. It felt like we were not in control and like there was a problem. If there is somebody who is acting in bad faith, will the Minister try to find out who it was or is he happy to just move on?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I do not know who leaked a letter. I do not know who it was leaked to. The Deputy says it was leaked that night. Perhaps it was. What I know is that RTÉ reported about level 5 on the news at 9 p.m. I do not think it got into detail as to what was in the letter so I do not know if RTÉ had the letter. It is possible that RTÉ was simply told that it was level 5. Remember that we strive to publish these letters as quickly as possible. I have in my bag this evening’s letter from the Chief Medical Officer. He and I met before the session this evening, after NPHET met. We discussed what was in the letter. I will, as the Department always does, endeavour to put that letter online and to share it with colleagues as quickly as possible. For what it is worth, I agree that information coming out in an uncontrolled way about a recommendation to move to level 5 scared many people, and I was frustrated to see it happen.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The Deputy is in politics, as we all are. Who leaked things and where is unfortunately not something I know but I share the Deputy’s frustrations. The Cabinet committee on Covid met with Dr. Holohan, Professor Nolan and Dr. Glynn at 12 noon the next day. We moved quickly. I share the Deputy’s frustration about the sense of fear on Sunday night.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I am not comforted that something like this could happen and that it could happen again. That is a problem for me and for the Irish people.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** To pick up on a point the Minister made, the practice is not to publish NPHET’s letters until the Cabinet makes a decision. They do not come out straight after NPHET meets. Let us get matters clear about the leaking of the letter or the information about the recommendation to move to level 5. Did the Minister or anybody associated with him leak that information?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** With the greatest respect-----

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** It is a straight question.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** No. I do not know how we define anyone associated with me. I can speak for myself. Neither I nor anyone who works for me leaked that letter.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** That is grand. That has clarified the point. The Minister and some of his Cabinet colleagues have mentioned that there was no reason that they could see for changing the levels or restrictions from the Thursday recommendation, and that nothing had changed in those three days.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** No, that is not what we said.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** The Minister said that Thursday's conditions did not warrant raising the levels.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** We did not say they did not change. They changed.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** That was the point that Dr. Holohan was making, that when he looked at the five-day average figures, they had changed quite substantially by Saturday, and there had been a 50% increase in the five-day average over that week. Is that the case?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** There had been an increase. There is exponential growth.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** There was a 50% increase. There were clearly many signs. Dr. Holohan had come back to work two days earlier than planned. There was an unscheduled meeting called for Sunday. The CMO contacted the Minister directly to tell him about that and the Minister spoke to him on Sunday morning. There were many signs that the situation was quite grave. Presumably that sense was conveyed to the Minister by the CMO. What did the Minister expect NPHET to recommend in light of the worsening situation that had been outlined to him?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I want to be clear. The Deputy seems to be suggesting that the advice warranted a move to level 5.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I did not say that.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The Deputy wrote to the Taoiseach on Monday, encouraging him not to move to level 5. We are clear about that. I was not expecting a recommendation to move to level 5. We had a recommendation on Thursday, when NPHET had carefully considered-----

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** What was the Minister expecting?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** -----the epidemiological situation. It recommended that Dublin and Donegal remain at level 3, with the rest of the country remaining at level 2.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** What was the Minister expecting on Sunday?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Let the Minister answer, please.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The Deputy will appreciate that if we get a recommendation on Thursday evening to keep the country at level 2, neither I nor, I imagine, any Member in this House, would expect a recommendation three days later to move to level 5. I was waiting to see what NPHET said. While having the greatest of respect for NPHET and its expertise, I was taken aback by the recommendation to move to level 5.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I made the point that the situation had clearly disimproved between Thursday and Saturday. There was a substantial increase in the five-day average, and I presume that was conveyed to the Minister on Saturday. I asked him what he expected would be recommended. What did the Minister expect the Chief Medical Officer and NPHET to recommend on Sunday night?

I will clarify one of the Minister's comments. I wrote to the Taoiseach on Monday and sug-

gested that we continue to use the levels rather than putting all counties on the same level. For example, Waterford had a rate of 34 cases per 100,000. This was suggested as an incentive for counties to work together to drive down the virus. That was the purpose of the levels being introduced.

I ask the Minister again what he was expecting NPHET to recommend on Sunday night.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I would not presume to expect anything. I am not a public health doctor. NPHET has the public health experts so all I would expect of NPHET, which is what it did, was to provide me and the Government with its best assessment of the public health position. That is what it did and it is what we all expect of NPHET. I certainly would not presume that NPHET would do one thing or another; it is entirely for NPHET to decide.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** The Minister's colleague, the Tánaiste, on Monday night said on RTÉ, "So we thought that this was not the right way to do things, to land something like this on a Sunday night without prior consultation". Does the Minister accept that was a wrong description of the sequence of events over Saturday and Sunday, that there had been communication with the Minister and, I presume, that the gravity of the position had been conveyed to him? The severity of the situation was not just "landed" on the Government on Sunday night. Does the Minister accept that to be the case?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I would not presume to speak for the Tánaiste, who is more than capable of speaking for himself. He answered exactly these questions earlier in this Chamber.

The substance of the Deputy's question is whether it was a surprise to me to get a level 5 recommendation on Sunday evening. It was a surprise. For the various reasons I outlined in the speech, we chose to go with level 3. The Deputy is asking whether I or my Cabinet colleagues were surprised by a recommendation to go to level 5. Yes, we were.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** In light of the Minister being brought up to date with the deteriorating position on Saturday and again on Sunday, I presume he was expecting level 4. I will just assume that is case.

This debate was promised by the Taoiseach when a number of us asked for it and he told us he would be present for it. It is a pity he is not. The debate was also rescheduled, as it was supposed to be tomorrow, which would have been better than late on a Thursday night.

There are a couple of general questions I want to ask on the Government's handling of this matter. Why did the Minister change the policy in his Department on the monitoring of incoming travellers at ports and airports? The Minister's Department confirmed last Thursday that the purpose of contacting people who travel into the country was not to monitor them any longer but to check where they were for the purpose of contact tracing. It is a very significant change in policy, which means there is no monitoring of incoming travellers at all. Why is that the case?

I have put my other question to the Taoiseach a number of times. There is a need for unity in the response to what is now a national emergency arising from the pandemic. Why is it the Taoiseach has not taken up the suggestion that an all-party forum should be established so we can have across the board agreement on the right way to deal with the pandemic? This should not be a matter for political disagreement, and the approach and strategy should be based on evidence.



Is the Minister of the view that we need a cross-party approach? Why has no action been taken in this regard? Is the Minister in favour of the suggestion I have made a few times, which is that the Taoiseach should establish a cross-party forum in order to respond to the many aspects of this national emergency?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will get to the second question and send the Deputy a detailed note on travellers, if she agrees.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Is the Minister responsible for changing the policy?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** No, but I will get the Deputy a note on that. On the idea of an all-party forum, I am very open to any forum of engagement. I was asked to be here tonight and I am here. I have appeared before the Covid-19 committee several times.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I am talking about a forum where real work can be done in a collaborative way.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Real work can be done in here as well and in a collaborative way. I have seen it happen. On a serious note, I am open to any suggestions the Deputy has. Neither I nor the Government nor any government in the world has a monopoly on how to respond to this virus. Everyone in this Chamber has something to say and I am very open to meeting the Deputy and other Deputies. The more input we can get from the Oireachtas, the better.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Why is that not happening?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The Deputy is raising it now and I am telling her I am very open to meeting others.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I have raised it with the Taoiseach for months.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The Deputy said she raised it with the Taoiseach but I cannot speak for him. The Deputy is raising the matter with me now and I am saying I would love to have as much input as possible on a cross-party basis. I fully agree that the more solidarity we have in facing this down, the better.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now move to Deputy Boyd Barrett, who is sharing his time with Deputy Paul Murphy.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Before this debacle emerged at the weekend, People Before Profit and RISE had already come to the conclusion we needed to move to a higher level of restrictions and that we should pursue a zero Covid-19 strategy. We held that view because after fairly intense discussions with public health and infectious disease experts, they predicted where we are now, with rising infection rates all over the country. They indicated that regardless of what the Government said, we would need to increase restrictions.

I want to get to what annoys me about what unfolded at the weekend. It is the manner in which the Tánaiste and the Government in general tried to trash the Chief Medical Officer and undermine his credibility in a very cynical way when it was clear he was simply offering a view about the need for greater restrictions based on his fears that if those restrictions were not introduced quickly, the health position would deteriorate but so would the social and economic position. Both employment and the wider economic position would become a bigger problem in three weeks if we did not act at that stage.

I point this out because the Tánaiste, in the most cynical way, suggested that the Chief Medical Officer did not give a damn about economic impacts, loss of employment and loss of income. It was the really dastardly part of the attack. The suggestion was that the Chief Medical Officer had no right to say what he did because he would not have to suffer on the pandemic unemployment payment. That is quite ironic from a Tánaiste who is part of the Government, which is cutting the payment. He was pretending it was his concern.

This was fundamentally dishonest because the Tánaiste and the Government knew that the view of NPHET and the Chief Medical Officer, whatever one thinks of it, sought to minimise economic, social and health damage. The Government might not have agreed with that view, and we could have an honest argument about that. Was it not deeply cynical, devious and wrong to try to undermine the Chief Medical Officer in that way or to say he did not have a rationale?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am loathe to get involved.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** You are becoming involved. You might stop the clock.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In fairness, even on a human level, I suspect this is something the Deputy would be much better taking up with the Tánaiste than the Minister for Health. I know we have collective Cabinet responsibility but the Deputy would be much better having that debate with the Tánaiste than a third party.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** My point-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We can start the clock again.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Government politicised this in a dishonest way instead of addressing the substance of the argument. There was an attempt to trash the person and the rationale behind his suggestions. That is what is wrong here. I ask the Minister to apologise for that treatment of the Chief Medical Officer on behalf of the Government and move on to a serious discussion about strategy, which cannot be had in the limited time we have here. We have been asking for this for several weeks. We have a particular view. We want to hear the Minister's view and we want to hear what the public health experts have to say. I would appreciate if Deputy Donnelly would respond to that.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** As the Ceann Comhairle said, I do not speak for the Tánaiste. I can apologise on my own behalf but not on behalf of anyone else. It would not be proper for me to apologise for the Government decision because I believe it was the right one. Even if it is not, just like the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, it was arrived at with only one intention, to minimise the damage and do best by the country.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Does the Minister agree that the Government's response to Dr. Tony Holohan's letter and recommendation was not the best? Should the Government not apologise for the treatment of the Chief Medical Officer?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** This pertains to the second part of the Deputy's question. I would like to divide this into process and substance. The substance is what matters. What matters is that we have moved the country to level 3. The debate over whether we should be at level 3 or level 5 is the debate that matters.

With regard to the Chief Medical Officer, I have given multiple interviews, had a press conference and appeared on "Prime Time", and in every one of those appearances I unequivocally

and wholeheartedly endorsed the man and his role. That is all I can say. I am happy to do so again right now. The Chief Medical Officer and I have met every day to discuss precisely these questions: testing and tracing, masks, antigen testing and suppression of the virus.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Minister and the Government made a very grave mistake this week by not following the public health advice. The consequence of that mistake is that we will still go to level 5, but we will do so later, for longer and after unnecessary deaths. That is a decision the Government made against the explicit opinion of NPHET that “[a] graduated approach will not have sufficient or timely impact on the trajectory and scale of the disease and will not protect the core priorities”. This is clearly a Government decision. The Government cannot hide behind NPHET. It is ignoring the public health advice.

It struck me that in his interviews and press conference the Minister was asked if he and the Government would take responsibility for this. He is the Minister for Health during a pandemic. He has made a decision not to go along with the advice of public health experts. If the level 3 strategy fails, as I believe it unfortunately will, does the Minister accept that is on him and on the Government? I have a second question to offer.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Governments are responsible for the decisions they make and I am a member of the Government. There is no ambiguity about that. The much more complex and difficult question is this: what will the outcome of this decision be compared to a counterfactual scenario we cannot evaluate, that is, a move to level 5? I know the Deputy wants to ask another question but I will give him one brief example. If we had moved to level 5 this week, it is clear that the number of cases would be lower in six weeks than if we stay at level 3. That is the whole point of the framework. We agree on that. We probably also agree that if we move to level 5 for four weeks, six weeks or whatever period, there would be very serious economic consequences. Just before coming to the Chamber I had a meeting with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform about next year’s health budget. That budget, and what the HSE and health workers around the country will do with it, will definitely save lives. There is no simple trade-off. The Deputy will forgive me if I misquote him, but I believe I heard him suggest that this was a trade-off between economic benefit and public health. I promise him it is not. I am the Minister for Health. All I want to do is keep people safe and have the best healthcare system we can possibly have.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Murphy has another question.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I have to consider that if less money is available for healthcare next year because of a move to level 5, that will also have very serious health implications.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I will offer some quick-fire questions. When the Minister spoke to the Taoiseach before the NPHET meeting, did he discuss level 4? On a separate issue, I note the Minister published a kind of propaganda video boasting about the great things the Government has done in its first 100 days and threatening us with more to come. Who paid for that video? Is it a Department of Health publication, in which case it is paid for by the public, or is it a Fianna Fáil or a personal Deputy Stephen Donnelly effort?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. The answer to the first question is “Yes”. The Taoiseach and I discussed level 4. The video came from Fianna Fáil.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now move to the Regional Group. I understand Deputy Matt Shanahan is sharing his time with some of his colleagues.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** Yes. Magnanimous, I know.

The Minister and I, along with other colleagues in the House, have engaged in hearings of the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. Unlike other Deputies here I am not interested in what happened last weekend. I am interested in our strategy and where we go from here. Without going back over where we were, the committee was very important and I am personally sorry to see it conclude without some continuing platform for the interpretation and interrogation of Covid-19 strategy. I know this function might be taken over by the Committee on Health, but I thought we were doing a pretty good job.

We have learned that testing and tracing are key. In that regard, I will give the Minister a synopsis of where I think we are at the moment. Earlier this evening I was looking at some data about the R number. In Dublin it is probably about 1.2 and for the country at large it is about 1.5. On that basis, incidence of the disease will double within two weeks. We know that testing and tracing are key and that we can individually test based on symptoms, which is what we are currently doing. We could screen test based on the indices, but we would need more capacity. If the disease keeps on rising we cannot continue to do either without adequate testing capacity or tracing resources.

NPHET has persevered with real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction, RT-PCR, testing only. It has refused to look at loop-mediated isothermal amplification, LAMP, testing or antigen testing, despite it being used everywhere else in the First World. Our border is open and air travel remains unrestricted. Our intensive care unit, ICU, capacity is fast diminishing and other diagnostic procedures such as breast cancer and cervical cancer screening are being deferred. As I have already told the Minister, my own hospital, University Hospital Waterford, has just one cardiac care isolation room. The Minister kicked that question on to the HSE, which has not bothered to answer me yet.

On top of this, numerous business sectors are also in need of intensive care and cannot continue to endure on-again, off-again business. The Tánaiste has suggested a circuit-breaker for the country in the form of a national lockdown.

What plan does the Government or NPHET have to deliver screen testing or asymptomatic targeting as a strategic move to isolate disease clusters in individuals? I brought antigen testing information to NPHET 13 weeks ago. All evidence shows it could seriously augment our national testing capacity. Why has this testing not been considered or used? Why has NPHET not considered the use of LAMP testing, which is now in use in Germany, France and Italy? Will the Minister commit to providing a pathway for outside medical opinion leaders to engage with NPHET on a regular basis regarding the ongoing modelling and testing it approves? Will he provide a platform for private industry to engage with NPHET on the possible roll-out of new technologies and to ensure a structured platform is developed such that follow-up analysis is communicated by NPHET to these industry leads?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The latest update I have from the Chief Medical Officer tonight is that the R-number is 1.2 for the country. Cases are continuing to rise but the R-number has come down. On mass screening, which is also referred to as serial testing, there are several programmes under way. There is serial testing in nursing homes, the meat processing industry and direct provision centres. The positivity rates are very low. The latest data indicates approximately 0.3% positivity, which is very positive, if the Deputy will excuse the pun, because it means very few of those people have it, but the testing is catching cases. It is catching staff

who are asymptomatic and have no idea they have Covid. It is not catching everybody who has Covid. It cannot do so. There is a very serious case in one nursing home which was reported in the past 48 hours.

On antigen testing, I am delighted to be able to provide some good news. We asked HIQA to do a technology assessment on rapid testing technologies. That paper was considered by NPHET today. The Chief Medical Officer, the deputy chief medical officer, the Secretary General and I met soon after the NPHET meeting and discussed this exact issue. Where it is at now is that it is the view of NPHET that the technology must be validated. That means that pilot schemes will be set up in which antigen testing will be run in parallel with PCR testing, which is seen as the gold standard. I believe HIQA, NPHET and the HSE will work together to validate that. I would like it to be very quickly validated and for our experts to believe there is a role for antigen testing. We discussed antigen testing used in other countries. Their view or understanding is that although other countries are using it, they are not using it as their primary test. The PCR testing is still the way to go in that regard. I am delighted to be able to report that progress as of today.

On the Deputy's question regarding companies, companies do not engage with NPHET. I am not sure such engagement would be appropriate. However, companies do engage with the HSE, which is working or engaging with companies in Ireland and abroad on various testing solutions.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** Companies should engage with NPHET. That has been a problem. It will be proven that antigen testing should have been augmented 13 weeks ago when I brought the issue to members of NPHET. The validation could have been done in the meantime. We need it now. We need to get these things delivered and we need people to be able to engage with thought leaders in NPHET. They cannot be blind to or out of communication with industry peers and medical peers. We are all in this together. We need to use all our resources.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** For many months, I have been calling for rapid testing at airports. I raised the issue again and again with the former Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, and the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin. I have called for rapid testing at airports to try to keep the country open. According to an article published on TheJournal.ie on Wednesday, 7 October, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, stated it would take "some time" to adopt the so-called traffic light system after it is agreed by the European Council of Ministers on 13 October. This is alarming. EU Governments must work together to safely open borders and adapt their health strategies. When that policy is approved, it should immediately be widely implemented throughout Europe so as to streamline enforcement measures, mitigate the risk of spreading Covid-19 and allow international travel within the EU in a safe and controlled environment.

A rapid test currently available on the market gives results in just 15 minutes. Some countries have tested these tests and approved them for use. This is another issue I have repeatedly raised with this Government and the previous Government, but it has apparently fallen on deaf ears. Airports can be equipped with a facility in the departure hall to test passengers before they proceed to check-in desks or security. In the 15 minutes it takes to get a result, a temperature check and a track and trace questionnaire could be completed before the passenger leaves the facility. If this procedure is advertised at the time of booking and the cost of the test is included in the ticket price, it would be a clever way to make people aware that they must stay at home if they show symptoms. In addition, it would instil confidence in people that air travel has been made safer. More and more educated people, professionals and experts, will migrate to other



countries, which will deprive Ireland of knowledgeable and skilled workers with Brexit looming. Ireland will be even more isolated from the rest of Europe and will soon be an outlier and an exception in the EU. We do not want that to happen. Solutions have been readily available for some time and can be implemented in days. Putting them in place only requires a bit of vision and goodwill. We cannot afford to discuss this any longer. Actions need to be taken immediately.

I refer to the level of lockdown that was forced on businesses in the space of days. I have my own thoughts about this fiasco. In my view, the recommendation to go to level 5 was leaked so that when the level 3 restrictions were announced by the Government they would be accepted. What is the Government doing? It sounds like it is coddling genuine people whose businesses are simply going under. Staff in pubs, cafés, restaurants and hotels, some of which had just reopened, are losing their jobs. The businesses were again closed nearly two weeks to the day after their reopening. Bars received bills for television licences, insurance and rates but they had been forced to close their doors. Bars, restaurants and coffee shops are now being forced to close again. Many of them will disappear. What advice would the Minister give to business people who phone him in the early hours of the morning to tell him they cannot afford to pay any of their bills, never mind their mortgages? The banks have put two fingers up to the Government and will not continue the moratorium. Covid-19 is killing people who have never contracted the disease. NPHET needs to be disbanded and reformed, with a wider variety of specialised people appointed to it in order that it understands every walk of life. All Members know the virus can be a killer if contracted, but what NPHET and the Government do not understand is that Covid-19 is killing more people who have not contracted it than people who die from it directly.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** A report from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, HPSC, indicates that 0.0002% of all outbreaks occur in hotels and 72% occur in private homes. I spoke this evening to the president of the Irish Hotels Federation. It wishes to meet the Department of Health and the Department of tourism. It is seeking an overall plan and for the Minister to tell it what it is missing, if anything. I spoke to various hoteliers from a business point of view. I am in business myself. One hotelier told me that the money the hotel took in that week was only enough to cover staff's wages and that if it had not been for the wage subsidy scheme that is in place, there would have been no money to pay for food, the ESB, phone bills and the other expenses that need to be paid to keep the hotel open. That indicates how important it is to subsidise these businesses. When the pubs reopened there was a big scare that there would be many outbreaks within the pub system, but pubs are a controlled environment and the HPSC has indicated that more outbreaks come from private homes. The Government is again driving people back into their homes. A couple from County Tipperary were due to get married this Saturday in County Limerick. After the level 3 announcement, the hotelier had to try to book the couple into a hotel in Tipperary to make sure they can get married on Saturday. Between them, they managed it. The hoteliers are working together.

The Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, stated on television a few nights ago that there are 40 medical people on NPHET. When I spoke on television afterwards, I asked how many members of the Cabinet are self-employed or from a business background. People from the hotel, music sector and travel agency sectors wish to sit down with a member of the Government for a meaningful conversation to give their day-to-day experience. Ministers, with their experience of being in Cabinet, could then work together to get them what they want. What I want from the Minister this evening is a commitment that in the short term he will meet with the hotels

federation. Its president, who is from Limerick, is Ms Elaina Fitzgerald Kane of the Woodlands House Hotel. I want a commitment that the Minister will meet and listen to them. They will work with the Minister and give him whatever advice and experience they have for both sides to help each other to go forward. I would like a reply to that from the Minister.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank Deputy O'Donoghue. I am one of the people at Cabinet who has a business background. I have a sense of how difficult it is to get up in the morning and work every hour so that you can pay your staff, pay your bills and, heaven forbid, get a bit of a margin at the end of the day to take home and live your own life. It breaks my heart to see what has happened around this country because of this disease. I see people who have dedicated their entire lives to running small local businesses or big businesses, or families who have done so for generations, who have been annihilated and it breaks my heart.

The Government has spent several billion euro, as the Deputy will appreciate, on the wage subsidy scheme, on the unemployment benefit and on the restart grants. This week, an additional 30% top-up for the restart grant was included. None of that will be enough. I spoke last week to hoteliers in my own county of Wicklow and it broke my heart to listen to what was going on, their stories and the stories of their staff, and staff who had worked in their hotels for generations. They were having to tell them the staff were at 10% occupancy or 15% occupancy, and they were closing. It is heartbreaking and it is not fair on anybody. I would love if we had the money in the country to do more. There is a multi-billion euro plan, probably the biggest economic stimulus plan that has ever been seen, in terms of the July stimulus and what came after that as well.

Of course, I will meet the industry. I met hoteliers recently in Wicklow. My understanding is they are engaged with the relevant line Minister as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We must move on.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am glad to hear the Minister speak those words so genuinely because these people's lives and jobs have been upturned. I speak of generations of families. I stay with one in the Minister's own constituency in Bray - he knows where it is. It is a family business employing 250 people and they want to keep those people. I was there last night and saw they still have 30 or 40 staff. They have loyalty to their customers going back and forward, and I salute them. I hope that the Minister has said this to the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, because the budget is on Tuesday. These businesses need funding. Whether the Minister has to get it from Europe or wherever, they need supports.

Is the Minister intent on reforming and revamping the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET? The NHS, across the water in England, has totally revamped its equivalent. Seven months have gone in since this team was pulled together. I salute the work and Dr. Tony Holohan, and wish him and his family well in case anybody would think otherwise, but they need some change or revamping because the fiasco at the weekend was not pleasant. People's livelihoods are depending on it. Forty is far too many. We need people from industry, the self-employed and people from mental health associations. Has the Minister made any calculation as to the cost of the damage to people's health, both mental and physical? I could name all the different checks that have been postponed, and note the mothers giving birth and having bad outcomes with their siblings or partners not allowed in.

A number of people have offered solutions for testing much more cheaply than what it is

being done for. The Minister, in answer to Deputy Shanahan earlier, stated that the HSE is dealing with that. It is too cumbersome. It is too slow. We saw the people who volunteered for Ireland from the Army and the different specialties and they have all been left. Some of them have lost their jobs now that they came home. The HSE only employed a minuscule amount of them. Are they keeping the positions for themselves? Is there a closed shop? I am aware of people who have gone with testing systems that are much cheaper and much quicker and they have not even got a look in. There is something wrong in the HSE that it is not engaging with these people. We need everybody with any idea of a good system to be engaged with now. That Minister might answer those questions.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Deputy Mattie McGrath might come back to me. Apologies, I was taking notes on his final question, which was testing. There are good solutions out there. Rapid testing or antigen testing is being looked at. NPHET considered a paper on it today. They will now do so-called “validation” of it, that is, run it side-by-side with polymerase chain reaction, PCR, testing, which is the accepted gold standard. I would like to see it deployed but, obviously, we have to get the nod in terms of validation.

The HSE is working and engaging with companies. HIQA took a fairly broad look. The Department of transport is also looking at rapid testing in potential solutions for the airports because there will need to be a great deal of testing as we go on.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What is the delay?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I do not know that there is a delay. Various countries are testing it. For example, there is a pilot programme in Heathrow Airport at present. We are looking at it. NPHET had it today. I would hazard an estimate that it will be deployed in the future, for example, as part of the airport testing, but we will have to have it validated by the health experts.

In terms of hiring, the HSE is hiring more than 3,000 people on the testing and contact tracing.

I beg the Deputy’s pardon. Will he remind me of his first question?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** My first question was whether the Minister would revamp, revitalise and re-energise, NPHET. They have all been at the coalface and working very hard, but the NHS has done it significantly. After seven months, surely there are things can be done differently and experts that can be brought in there.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Restructuring NPHET.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Given the fluidity of the situation and the fact that we are learning all the time, that suggestion should be kept under consideration. Certainly, what I want to see and what, when we launched the framework, was brought in was an oversight committee with representation from other Departments, such as business, transport and foreign affairs, to try to do that. Should we have as much broad and rounded experience from the very best women and men in this country feeding into what is a national effort? Absolutely, we should.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I thank the Minister for being here.

I wanted to raise two separate issues. The first relates to the events on Sunday. Second, I want to ask about the ongoing Covid issues.

First, in the Minister's statement here outlining his discussions with the Chief Medical Officer on Sunday morning, he stated: "We discussed the current situation and the possibility of moving to level 4." Looking at some of the stories that were released about the matter, the *Irish Examiner* published an article at 5.10 p.m. stating that the country was on the verge of moving to level 4. That was the only mention of level 4 at any stage during that, and that was at 5.10 p.m. on Sunday. In light of what the Minister stated here, that is interesting. Also, *The Irish Times*, which is not published on Sunday, stated that it was understood that NPHET met at noon and the meeting was ongoing. It reported that one Government source said the source thought they were in a very difficult situation. There seems to be something between the initial phone call that the Minister had from the Chief Medical Officer and before the end of the NPHET meeting on Sunday that seems to have been reported widely. The *Irish Examiner* talks about level 4 and the Minister has talked about level 4 in his own statement. It seems the leaks came from somewhere within the Government. The Minister stated in response to a question earlier on that it was not him or any of his staff, but the Minister was not asked if he spoke to any journalists between the phone call from the Chief Medical Officer and 5 p.m., when the ongoing reports then started to appear, and particularly where they mention level 4 and that seems to be the only time that it has been mentioned.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I can cut to the heart of the Deputy's question and allegations. I can assure the Deputy that I did not talk to any journalists about moving to level 4. The events were quite clear. The events were: I contacted the Chief Medical Officer early on 9 o'clock Sunday and said I would like to talk before NPHET; he and I spoke; we had a very productive conversation; he talked about the escalating situation; the prospect of moving to level 4 was raised; and we spoke after NPHET. NPHET met, I believe, at noon.

I do not know when they finished but the Chief Medical Officer, the deputy CMO, the Secretary General and I had a call around 7 p.m. That was the first time I heard about level 5. I noted it was then reported on RTÉ either on the nine o'clock news or perhaps before that.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** According to *The Irish Examiner* it was 5.10 p.m.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Okay. Honestly, who knows? People leak information. The Deputy and I have both been here for the past ten years and we know that. I can only say that I was not leaking anything. I was focused very much on NPHET, the situation and what could happen. The recommendation was very serious even if we did not go to level 5, going to level 3 is a really serious thing to do and a very difficult decision to make. That was my sole focus.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I know the decision was difficult to make. I agree that people leak but only some people leak, not everybody does. That is important in this. It has become very important where the story leaked from and how it was leaked because of the reaction of the Minister's colleagues and what they have said publicly about it. It was not my intention coming into the House this evening to discuss that but when I saw what was being said, I wanted to raise it. The leak came between 12 noon and 5 p.m. on Sunday so it is important to know who knew then what was actually discussed. It seems the only person who is not here who did know something about that then is the Taoiseach. It is interesting that we were supposed to have this discussion tomorrow with the Taoiseach present, but now we are not and he is not here tonight. Maybe there is something to that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is not my job to defend the Taoiseach or anybody else but that is not what I heard.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I am not asking the Ceann Comhairle to defend him. Do not worry about that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is not what I heard in the discussions.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** The Minister has said that he discussed what had happened with the Taoiseach.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** After 7 p.m.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** No, he said he discussed it before when he got the call from the Chief Medical Officer.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** My apologies.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** He said he contacted the Taoiseach afterwards. The only two people in Government who knew about this were the Minister and the Taoiseach and some of the officials.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Fair enough.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Therefore the leaks seem to have come from within Government. That is what I was trying to get to the bottom of.

The Minister said the Government would like to see more detailed options for the end of the four week period at level 5. I believe that we should have gone to level 5 and things look like we will go to level 5 in the next week or so anyway, with schools closing early for Hallowe'en. Maybe that will not happen. I want to tease out what the Minister said. What are the detailed options on carrying on as we are? I was at a meeting last week when very prominent medical people outlined what happens in Africa and so on with virus outbreaks etc. where peaks and troughs are ongoing. They said this pandemic would be ongoing for at least two to three years. We are looking at another two or three years at least of this cycle of lockdowns and reopening. How is that good for our society or for the businesses that many Members have mentioned this evening? How can we sustain things into the future like that? Maybe NPHET has modelled it differently and the Minister thinks that this will break the back of the pandemic now. If that is the case I would like to hear it. That is the crux of the matter. If we went for a full lockdown now and closed the whole thing down we could close the numbers down and then open everything back up by having proper testing and tackling the instances as they arise. We would have to do that on an all-island basis, that would be very important. Those are the options and that is what we should be talking about.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** My apologies for interrupting Deputy Pringle.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** On the leak, the Deputy and I have worked together for many years and he knows I have the height of respect for him but I think the comments about the Taoiseach are unfair. I know he is just wondering out loud but -----

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** The Minister said that two people knew about it.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I do not think that it is fair. I acknowledge the gravity of the Deputy's second question and thank him for asking it. Many are asking questions about who texted who when and who called who when and why did something happen at 6 p.m. on a Satur-



day instead of 12 o'clock on a Sunday. There was a very clear process over the weekend which led us to have to make a decision. All that matters is the substance of the Deputy's question.

I have met the zero Covid people and we have had some good conversations. There is good thinking there. We all agree on the direction of travel, namely to suppress the virus. They want to go further and have a view of what can happen when we get there. The public health officials who advise me have a different view and the experience around Europe is also different. No country knows the right answer to this, it is new, but other European countries are not pursuing a zero Covid strategy.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** No other European country is an island.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Yes but we share it with another jurisdiction and we are an open country.

The R-nought is 1.2. I want to see a national effort to achieve across the country what the people of Kildare, Laois, and Offaly nailed in August. If we get the R-nought below 1 the virus will begin to go back. We need to push it right back down. The reason we are staying at level 3 rather than going to level 5 is because when one considers the societal, health and economic impacts - and the latter is related to future healthcare provision, it is not just about the economy - that that was the best option. We could end up on level 4 or 5, that is why they are part of the framework, but we must do everything we can to avoid that in coming weeks.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I have a substantive question but I am somewhat perplexed by the Minister's apparent lack of understanding of exactly what happened across families and communities from Sunday night until Monday night after the news broke at 9 p.m. that NPHET proposed to move to level 5. The reaction, the briefing against NPHET that culminated in the outright attack on it by the Tánaiste on Monday night, created a level of anxiety, frustration and concern that we have not seen since the initial outbreak of the virus. That is why the questions are being put to the Minister by Members because Deputies have been getting those questions from constituents all week. For the Minister to diminish or belittle that or to besmirch the motives of anyone who asks about it is unbecoming of him.

The Minister has answered many questions, in fairness, so I just seek one clarification. The Minister said that following his conversation with the CMO on Sunday morning, where he suggested that there might be mention of level 4, he spoke to the Taoiseach. Am I correct that the Minister conveyed the information to the Taoiseach that NPHET was considering an escalation of the levels up to or including level 4? According to a recent tweet from an *Irish Independent* journalist, the Taoiseach's spokesperson told the paper yesterday that the Taoiseach did not know that the NPHET meeting on Sunday was about changing levels until afterwards.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I am going to refute various statements that the Deputy made. NPHET met on Sunday. I then met the Chief Medical Officer, the deputy Chief Medical Officer and the Secretary General and we discussed what was a very serious recommendation. NPHET met the Cabinet Covid committee-----

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I am asking about Sunday.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** -----the next morning at 12 noon. Then the Cabinet met. The Deputy has suggested that some attacking and negative briefing against NPHET was going on during that period, culminating in something else on Tuesday. That is simply untrue. I have, as

has the rest of the Government, a close working relationship with NPHET.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Please, answer the question.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Are we always going to agree with NPHET? No. The Deputy's own party did not agree with the move to level 5.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I asked the Minister a specific question. Will he answer, please?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I am answering-----

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister is not.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** -----but I am first refuting-----

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** That is fine.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** -----various false allegations the Deputy has made.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I asked the Minister a question.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I have answered it repeatedly, Deputy. Yes, I spoke to the Chief Medical Officer on Sunday morning. We discussed the escalating epidemiological situation. The potential for a move to level 4 was raised. I emphasised my desire to see NPHET stick to the parameters of the framework. The information about level 4 was conveyed to the Taoiseach.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** That was the only information for which I asked. Will the Minister ask one of his media monitors to go through the Twitter feeds of political correspondents from Monday regarding the response from Government sources to the NPHET recommendation of the evening before? It was an outright attack. It was broadcast live to every home in the country that had "Claire Byrne Live" on a television set last Monday when the Tánaiste launched an unprecedented attack.

The Minister will be aware that I have raised the issue of meat plants and food processing factories a number of times. I have a major concern that we might be better off if we had handled the situation better. Some testing has taken place in meat plants. Last month, 109 positive cases emerged from testing in meat factories where each of the cases was asymptomatic. That gives a sense of the potential issues. We do not know how many cases there were in factories where there was no testing.

I am afraid that no Department is willing to take on this matter. My fear is exacerbated by the fact that, on 6 August, NPHET agreed the interim recommendations of the "Investigation into a Series of Outbreaks of COVID-19 in Meat Processing Plants in Ireland". Like me, the Covid-19 committee and others have been asking for that report to be published. This week, the committee received a notification from the HSE that the report still would not be published. Why not? Will the Minister endeavour to ensure that it is?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Yes. That would not be a problem. Perhaps we can engage after this session and the Deputy can tell me exactly to which report he is referring. I will certainly endeavour to get it for him. There should not be any issue with that whatsoever.

Serial testing is under way in meat processing plants. Happily, the positivity rate remains

very low. The tests are working and picking things up, but the Deputy is right. Due to the nature of this disease, many people who are asymptomatic could be working in higher risk places like meat processing plants or be in direct provision or nursing homes. They have absolutely no idea that they have the disease. We are continuing with the serial testing for exactly that reason. If there is any information that the Deputy needs, or if he has any idea that he wants to discuss with me about how to make the situation safer and better for the industry and workers or about any associated issue, let us sit down and go through them.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister has approximately nine minutes to conclude if he wishes to making concluding remarks.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Is it not ten minutes?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I apologise. I did not realise that there would be ten minutes at the end, given that we were dealing with the questions as we went along.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Okay, but if the Minister wishes to make some general remarks, that would be fine.

**Minister for Health(Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Thank you. I thank all of the Deputies for their various questions. I will finish with this. While there has been a great deal of debate, as there always will and should be in this Chamber, none of us wants to see the country moving to level 4 or 5 because we understand the consequences of that. We know it is possible, but I do not believe it is inevitable. We will have an opportunity over the next few weeks to push the R number below 1. If we do that, the virus will begin to shrink. We will then keep pushing it back. However, it will take every one of us embracing what level 3 means. The vast majority of people are following the measures the vast majority of the time. If any of us can find an extra little way of pushing that a little more, then let us do that and help one another do that. For example, if staff really do not need to be at work, employers can work with their employees to help them work from home. During training, let us be sure that those who need to be present are socially distanced. Obviously enough, this means the people who are training, but also parents and others.

To this day, the best and clearest advice I have heard came from Dr. Ronan Glynn at a press conference a few weeks ago. He made it simple. We have tried to keep the framework as straightforward as possible, but we are laying out five levels of measures across our entire society and economy. With the best will in the world, that cannot be captured in a single message. We each must look at the measures and see what we need to do at this level for our counties. Dr. Glynn summed it up well. At the time, the R number was 1.6 or 1.5. He said that we had to get it below R-1 and then told us what to do, namely, to have a think about tomorrow and the coming week and where in that week we would meet people, because that is how this bloody virus spreads. It spreads from one person to another when we are together. The framework is in place to stop the virus. Dr. Glynn said that, whatever number of people we were planning on meeting, be it in a friend's house, at training, at work or wherever, we should try to reduce it. At the time, he suggested trying to halve it, which he said would bring the R number down from 1.6 to 0.8. That would be a drop from rapid growth to negative growth.

Before I came to the Chamber this evening, I sat down with Dr. Holohan, Dr. Glynn and the Secretary General to discuss the latest NPHET advice from today. As I was leaving, I told Dr. Holohan that I was going to the Dáil for an hour and a half of good debate and that, hopefully,

some people would be watching. I asked him whether there was any message he wanted me to try to get out from the Dáil to anyone who might be watching. He told me to just ask people to double down on this. We are at level 3. We all know and accept that he wants to go to level 5, which I fully respect. He told me to ask the nation to double down on level 3. We saw this working in the Ceann Comhairle's constituency and county. It worked in Kildare, Laois and Offaly. It should be more effective now, given that the entire nation is at level 3 rather than just those three counties, Dublin or Donegal. It was harder for them because other counties did not have the same restrictions. Level 3 applies to the full Twenty-six Counties right now.

That is the note on which I would like to end. There has been much talk about text messages and so on. I firmly believe that what happened over the weekend was entirely sensible and reasonable and was the Government functioning. When we are all considering decisions of the magnitude of moving our country to level 5 - asking people to stay at home and shutting down businesses across the country – or even level 3, there will inevitably be disagreements. Sometimes, there will be robust debate, and there was in this instance.

If we embrace the current restrictions for a few weeks, do as Dr. Holohan said and double down on the level 3 measures - the people of Kildare, Laois and Offaly showed the way and the people of Dublin are showing it now, because the infection rate has flatlined there - I believe that we can do this and we can push the virus back down. A total of 1 million students have gone back to school and continue to go to school. Some 250,000 students have gone back to higher education. A lot of that activity has moved online but they are back in higher education or in it for the first time. Something north of 400,000 people have gone back to work and moved off the PUP since the height of the first wave and since we began to open things up again. These are things of which we should all be proud. The hospitals are open and screening services are back up and running. What our doctors, nurses, therapists and disability service providers are having to do to get those services back up and running is not easy but, by God, they are doing it. We should be incredibly proud of our teachers, clinicians and business people. Indeed, I know all of us are proud.

We are capable of pushing this virus back with the current measures. Kildare, Laois and Offaly gave us hope and showed us the way. Dublin is doing the same now and the rest of us are more than capable of doing likewise. Notwithstanding the debate this evening, everyone in this House wants the same thing. We have a common enemy in Covid. We need to work together to push the virus back, keep schools, colleges and businesses open and get the remaining businesses open, and keep the hospitals and primary care centres open. We must work together through the winter, because it will be a hard winter in many different ways for the people we represent. People are going to feel isolated and scared. Businesses will struggle. Our public services and public servants are going to struggle. It will be a hard winter and we need to help and support each other to push this godawful virus back and open up our country, society, economy and communities as much as we possibly can.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank Members for their contributions and the Minister for his motivational remarks. We will meet again next Tuesday in the national convention centre for budget day.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.25 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 13 October 2020.