



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Revised*)

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 25 Feabhra 2021*

*Thursday, 25 February 2021*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh) i gceannas ar 10 a.m.

***Paidir agus Machnamh.  
Prayer and Reflection.***

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## **Health (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)**

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

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Ireland has the longest lasting and most severe workplace restrictions in Europe. We have lost 163 days of work due to closure. This compares to 34 days in Germany. Does the Minister not agree that it is an outstanding fact that this country has had to lock down for longer with restrictions more severe than other European countries due to the way this illness has been managed? Indeed, for most of the Covid crisis this country has been a radical outlier in terms of the severity of the lockdowns that have happened. That is a direct result of the catastrophic policies that have been implemented by the last Government and by the current one as well.

This has had an enormous impact on every element of society. I have been talking to a consultant psychiatrist recently who told me the number of young people presenting to accident and emergency departments with acute mental health issues has increased by 130% since 2019. Coupled with the staff shortages in the hospitals and the reduction of treatments, the length of this lockdown is taking a massive toll on the health and well-being of the Irish people.

One of the most frustrating costs of Government failure has been the closure of key aspects of the health service. Patients with cancer, heart disease or mental health illnesses, as well as those who have suffered from stroke have had their access to health services radically reduced under the Government. During the week, the Minister will have heard an oncologist from Limerick who appeared on “Morning Ireland” state that the health service needs to prepare for an influx of seriously ill cancer patients. He said that a large number of patients are presenting with more advanced disease and late diagnosis. Thus, for tens of thousands of people, access to diagnosis has either been stopped or slowed down radically and as a result, access to treatment has either been stopped or slowed down radically. Consequently, those illnesses are far more progressed and will need far more radical treatments, which will have a significant cost on people both physically and financially, and on the State financially as well, in the future. Aontú has been one of the few voices in here calling for the protection of these key and critical health

services through this whole pandemic.

The issue of travel, which we are discussing today, is one of the most mind-bending issues that have been associated with this illness over the past year. For most of the past year, the Government has radically curtailed the freedoms and liberties of Irish citizens with a Garda-enforced 5 km limit, while at the same time allowing for hundreds of thousands of travellers to travel to this country from all over the world with no limit. The only protection put in place is a form or two to be filled with maybe a text after that, or perhaps a follow-up phone call, but in most cases not even that. The fact that so many people in this country were so severely locked down and restricted while international travel remained so open is one of those issues that most people cannot get their heads around when it comes to the management of this illness by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party. If one were to think of a phrase that describes the Government's journey to this day and this Bill, "kicking and screaming" would best fit.

At the very start of this pandemic, I remember talking to the then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, when all of the leaders of the parties were gathered around after the general election to discuss what was happening. At the time we saw a massive flare-up of this illness in northern Italy and I asked the then Taoiseach to stop the flights coming from northern Italy to Ireland. He said "No". I asked him why he would not stop the flights coming to Ireland and he told me the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, said not to stop them. The ECDC told the Government that it should not stop flights coming from other parts of Europe to Ireland. I asked the then Taoiseach what the rationale was for this decision and he said he did not know. If there was a manager of a Centra in Navan making a decision for that shop while not understanding the rationale for it, for how long would that manager stay in that position? I guarantee Members that individual would not last long. It is incredible that the CEO of the country, the leader of the country, was making life and death decisions for this country on the basis of advice from a foreign organisation and not knowing the rationale for it. As a result, we saw people from northern Italy circulate throughout Dublin and seed the disease well and truly. It happened at the same time with Cheltenham. When there were fruit pickers coming from all over Europe to pick fruit in north Dublin and east Meath, again I raised it and again the Government shrugged and had nothing to say about it. Before Christmas I spoke to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on RTÉ radio and said there will be tens of thousands of people travelling to this country during the Christmas period, that it was going to happen whether the Government liked it or not, and that therefore, the Government should put in place some level of testing to make sure that if these people do come, that they do not have the illness. That was not put into place and tens of thousands of people travelled to Ireland at that time. I have heard Fianna Fáil Ministers on the radio saying international travel does not have a big impact on the number of Covid cases that exist in the country and then in the same breath state that 90% of the cases in Ireland are of the British variant. That they cannot put two and two together is deeply worrying.

I want to address the confusion on vaccine roll-out. Right now, two months after the vaccine landed in this country, the equivalent of the population of County Louth has been fully inoculated. That is an incredible situation. I have had student nurses, who were not on placement for months, call me and tell me they have had the vaccine. They did not want it and feel bad about taking it. They took it and then they have received a phone call saying they have their second first vaccine. They are being told the second first vaccine is being given to them. In Tuam, they have the vaccine but they do not have the needles. In my own county, doctors are ringing me to say they have no confirmation yet for the next two weeks for vaccines for people

over the age of 85 years. This glacial roll-out of the vaccine is going to radically slow down the opening up of this country and at the same time we will be watching our neighbours get back to normal while we are still well and truly locked down. Has the Minister gone to supply chains outside of the EU to look for additional vaccines? Denmark and Germany have done so. Why has Ireland not done so?

Aontú does not have confidence in the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, or the work he is doing at this time. There needs to be a radical change in the approach to dealing with this issue to make sure the country is opened up and people's lives are protected.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The first issue I wish to highlight is where Ireland stands internationally in terms of vaccine provision. The previous speaker should take the liberty of checking the facts before he makes claims which are not true. The fact is that Ireland is ahead of Spain, Portugal, Germany, Italy and France in terms of vaccinations per 100,000 population.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Out of 200 countries.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I did not catch the Deputy's interjection, but I wish to make clear to him that Ireland is doing extremely well compared with other countries. Indeed, if he had been listening to the Minister for Health, he would know that we have ordered in the region of 10 million vaccines. The issue about vaccination is that we all went together as European citizens. The Deputy may be aware that there is a meeting today of all the European Union Heads of State and Government with the aim of rolling out the vaccines even more quickly than has been the case up to now. Significant progress has been made.

The sun is shining today and we are in a different phase of spring. Changes are coming in our society as a result of the sacrifices that people have made. Many have made significant sacrifices and thousands have died but the facts are that on this morning the R number is going down and the numbers of people in hospitals and ICUs are going down. We are vaccinating more than 100,000 people per week and that number will shortly be 250,000 per week. Children are returning to schools and preschools. Routine health checks are beginning to recommence. I welcome the progress that has been made with regard to BreastCheck.

There are serious issues, such as that of vaccination centres. It is not acceptable that towns such as Drogheda, which is the largest urban area in the country outside of the cities and has a population in excess of 40,000, will not have a vaccination centre. The Minister must address that issue now. He must bring the vaccinators to the people rather than the other way around. It does not make sense for everybody in the town of Drogheda to travel to Dundalk or Navan when the vaccinators could come to the town to deliver the vaccine in an appropriate and proper environment.

I refer to the two-island strategy. We should converge as much as possible with the United Kingdom and, indeed, the Administration in Northern Ireland because of the existence of the common travel area. We must ensure that people can meet their family members, whom they may not have seen for more than a year, and that we can have the same regulations east and west and North and South. That would make a significant difference for many families. I have not seen my grandchildren for more than a year. The same is true for thousands of people in this country and I want that to change.

On the issue of change, the Dáil should be sitting five days a week in this Chamber and, if needs be, in the Dáil Chamber or the Seanad Chamber in Leinster House to ensure there is due

and proper analysis of all the movements and changes that are happening in the health services in order that we can have true and proper accountability.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** In recent days, I have been dealing with numerous calls from elderly people in County Longford. They are frustrated and anxious and they are questioning and wondering about the validity of the vaccine roll-out. To put it in context, there are 2,000 people over the age of 85 in County Longford and a further 8,000 over the age of 65. All present accept that those age groups are the priority for vaccine roll-out. Approximately 1,500 of them have been dealt with through nursing homes.

I know of an 86-year-old woman who has put her life on hold for the past year. She and her general practitioner, GP, expected that she would get her first vaccine this Friday but last Monday she was told it would be another two weeks before the GP gets the supply of vaccine. That is no fault of the GP. I know that GPs across the county have pulled out all the stops, rescheduled staff and reorganised their surgeries with the stated aim of making this vaccine campaign work.

As I sat in the party room yesterday listening to An Taoiseach take Leaders' Questions, I got a call from a 76-year-old woman from Aghnacliff. Her only contact with the outside world for the past year has been when her two sons and her daughter call to her house and speak to her through the window. The one thing that has sustained her for the past two months has been the anticipation of getting the vaccine and a possible opportunity to visit her newborn granddaughter in London. She was angry. Through her tears, she told me that, for the first time in her life, she knows what it is like to be depressed.

There are shortcomings in the roll-out campaign but there are also many positives. However, the communication is failing us thus far. I hear the same glib advertising campaigns on the radio ten times a day and I see the same sterile and non-specific campaigns in print and online. What the 10,000 people over the age of 65 in County Longford want to know is when they will get their vaccines. To the credit of the local GPs, there is a massive plan under way in anticipation of the roll out. Several GPs in Longford will today commence the vaccination of over-80s. I am aware that more than 380 GPs will receive their supply this week and up to 500 practices will receive their supply next week. We are now committed to rolling out 1.2 million vaccines before the end of March and the target is 4.2 million vaccines by the end of June. These are big numbers but people are still sceptical. We need to start engaging with them and giving them real, specific and localised dates for when they will get their vaccines.

I acknowledge the difficulty of the Minister's job, but I believe he will lead us around the corner. However, he will only be able to do so if we get to grips with the vaccine campaign. To that end, we need to start engaging with older residents. They need to be reassured in good time that there is a plan and a date for their vaccination.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** As many Deputies have stated, there has been a significant difficulty with miscommunication. Even the Government has admitted that because it is beyond denial. The live-streaming of parliamentary party meetings is not a pretty sight. A person said to me earlier that parliamentary party meetings are like the making of sausages - far from pretty and nobody should know what happens inside them. It really is not helping people that they are getting multiple lines from multiple sources and they are not entirely sure which to believe. It is okay for those of us who listen to every detailed news bulletin and can see generally what is happening, but that is not the case for everybody. What is done is done, but we need the Gov-

ernment, the Minister, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste to collectively get their act together and get the messaging sorted because one of the difficulties people have with regard to the vaccine roll-out is that they lack confidence in it. They will only have confidence when they are given a plan, see that plan enacted and have absolute clarity from on top. We need that to happen.

A significant number of people have made great sacrifices. Not everybody has done so, but a significant number of people have. Those people expect the Parliament, the Government and the State to do their part. The Government has taken its time getting to the point of agreeing to the quarantining of travellers from approximately 20 countries. I accept that there is latitude for more countries to be added to that list, but what we really need is for hotel quarantine to be introduced for everybody coming into the country. That would deal with any issues of indirect flights and from where a person came. All Members are aware of the issues with regard to the various strains of the virus. In this State, we must reduce the numbers. We need to ensure that we do not allow a greater level of transmission or the creation of new strains. We definitely do not need to import any new strains. This legislation will be reviewed and there is a three-month sunset clause, so we should ensure that hotel quarantine is brought in across the board.

This is about regaining the dressing room. The only way the Government will do so is by showing people that it has their backs. Sinn Féin accepts that this is not New Zealand and that there is a significant number of essential workers who are necessary for the supply chain, but we need to fireproof as much as we can. We have been hearing about progress with regard to the sharing of information relating to international travellers North and South for a long time. At this point, I want to see a solution and nothing else. I am not particularly worried about whether we get an all-Ireland response or a two-island response, but we need a better response. It is as simple as that. All Members welcome the fact that the number of vaccinations will increase and that there may be 1 million vaccinations per month in April, May and June. We need to do what we can to ensure that we do not have new strains coming into the country and to protect our people. I beseech the Minister to do what is necessary. We need clarity and better communication. As already stated, what is done is done and we need an improved plan from here on in.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I was deeply sorry and shocked to hear about the threat to the Minister's family home. Such behaviour is totally unacceptable and appalling. It must have generated unnecessary concern for him and his family. Those actions should not have happened and I wholeheartedly condemn them.

As we know, this Bill proposes to introduce mandatory quarantine for travellers arriving into this State to limit the spread of Covid-19, particularly in light of recent variants of the disease which have been identified. It also increases various penalties for breaches of Covid-19 restrictions, which I welcome. Can we have a date for when this will come into effect and be implemented? The public have questions. They have made great sacrifices, as we all know. People have not seen their families in the past year in some cases and it is difficult. In order to give people hope, we must provide some dates for the implementation of these measures.

This issue was debated, to some extent, in the context of the Labour Party Private Members' motion which called for the introduction of mandatory hotel quarantine for all travellers arriving by sea and air into the State, with the exception of designated essential and logistic workers with polymerase chain reaction, PCR, testing at arrivals and follow-up tests after five days. The Rural Independent Group has continuously raised this issue and spoken about the need for such a regime to be implemented. As long ago as April, we were strongly calling for this measure. At the time, I wrote to the then Taoiseach and then Minister for Justice and Equal-

ity, requesting that all necessary preventative measures be put in place urgently to safeguard against the heightened risk of Covid-19 infections emerging from within the tourist population. It is difficult to understand or grasp why hundreds of thousands of tourists entered this country when very strict restrictions were imposed on our citizens. It is hard to fathom why this was allowed to continue. It was certainly wrong and we in the Rural Independent Group have been consistent in condemning it.

There was a lot of speculation last April as to the numbers arriving in the country but that is not the case now. We know that thousands of people have entered the State under all levels of the restrictions. We also know that this is the kind of action that has served to radically and fundamentally undermine public confidence in the overall capacity of the various Covid plans to reduce the case incidence rate. People see news reports of another thousand, several thousand or tens of thousands travelling into the State while Irish people are confined to a paltry 5 km travel limit, and that is not acceptable. Many constituents in my rural constituency of Laois-Offaly have contacted me about this matter, asking for the 5 km limit to be extended because it does not make sense to confine people in that way, particularly in rural areas. I ask the Minister to look at that.

It is only natural that a certain level of resentment and anger is going to build up about the perceived unfairness and, as I said last April, we can allow exemptions for those involved in maintaining food security and supply or essential health services and I am happy to see that the Bill before us provides for that. As I welcome this Bill, it is difficult to avoid a sense that we are closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. The general public and I would have preferred a more proactive approach instead of trying to catch up now. We had an opportunity to engage in genuine preventative measures last year with respect to our airports and inward travel but we failed to adopt such measures because deference was given to the European travel area requirements. As I understand it, we already had in place a wide-ranging and enhanced customs infrastructure last April. It was initially put in place to deal with post-Brexit customs checks at Rosslare Europort. It has involved Revenue appointing over 400 additional staff nationally to customs and related roles for Brexit, with 30 of them being assigned to Rosslare Europort. Surely some of those staff members and some of the customs check infrastructure could have been repurposed to ensure that people entering the State through our ports or airports were here for genuine reasons of absolute necessity and not for non-essential reasons. Tourists were entering this country when our own people were confined. That does not make any sense. I hope we will not see that happening going forward.

Perhaps if we had taken more proactive measures, we would not be in the position we are today. I note that the Long Title to the Bill emphasises that the Bill makes exceptional provision in the public interest to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 and variants thereof. It notes particularly that the emergence of variants of the disease, specifically the United Kingdom, Brazilian and South African variants, show evidence of increased transmissibility and the potential to evade immune response, posing a very serious risk to public health. The Bill states that the spread of such variants may pose a threat to the effectiveness of some vaccines and affect the State's vaccination programme. We have to be serious about mandatory quarantine as we move forward. It cannot be tokenistic and every measure needs to be rolled out to make sure that we are preventing the spread of infection.

I hope that our carers will be prioritised for a vaccine. I know there is some prioritisation of people in categories with underlying health issues. I hope that the vaccine will be rolled out to our carers.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** We are talking about mandatory quarantine which should have been implemented for people entering this country long before now. I called for it last April or May, although I have not checked my records in that regard. The reason I called for it is that I come from a constituency with a high volume of tourism. I felt at that time that for me to give confidence to the people of west Cork, we had to have PCR testing of people coming into our country. I called for it at that time but the then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, refused. I was on the Covid-19 committee and called for the move there but it was continuously refused. As Deputy Nolan just said, we are closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. We are, unfortunately, trailing and falling behind and it is going to cost our country very dearly.

I was talking to a gentleman who came in from the United States recently. He was in Dunmanway in west Cork. He said that he thought the rules and restrictions here would be as good as they are in some other countries when he came home to see his mother. He would not go straight home. He made sure that he rented a car that was full of fuel so he would not stop on the way to Dunmanway. He made sure that the Airbnb he booked for 14 days would be full of food for that length of time so he would not have to go out. He could not believe that when he came here he did not have to do any of that. He could have stopped on the way down and gone anywhere he wanted. He could have called in to see people. He could have been at the shop the next morning and it would not have mattered a damn. He was astonished to think that we had such lax laws and that has, unfortunately, proven very costly.

While I agree that all people other than essential workers need to quarantine when coming into the country, I still have serious concerns that the fallout on our hotel sector will be detrimental. Many in the hotel industry in west Cork have contacted me to voice their serious concerns. The all-important summer trading period could be in jeopardy. That period serves as a life buoy to sustain a business through the other months of the year in normal times. If hoteliers' opportunity to earn money at that time is eroded, additional Government supports will be critical to their survival. It is now make or break time. We need to secure urgent Government action to protect the long-term viability of the Irish tourism and hospitality community. The hotel industry needs a Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, to target businesses with a 75% drop in revenue. I suggest a doubling of payments irrespective of the level of Covid restrictions, as well as the removal of the current €5,000 weekly cap. It is estimated that 44% of hotel bedroom stock is excluded from CRSS entirely. The limit of €5,000 equates to an annual turnover of €4.2 million or 58 bedrooms per hotel. Hotels need an extension of the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, to the end of 2021.

I ask the Government to intervene with the banks for businesses that are in a serious crisis to ensure that concessions-based moratoriums are provided for tourism businesses and their teams until the restrictions are lifted. There should be a clear commitment to the retention of the 9% rate of VAT for the tourism sector, until at least 2025, to assist with recovery and to provide certainty for businesses in the sector. We need fast action. The Minister is at the Cabinet table and he must ensure that his colleagues are singing the same tune. There should be a refund of energy pass-through charges of 70% on State-controlled fixed-energy network charges for gas and electricity in line with the drop in energy consumption and hotel revenues due to Government restrictions. This must be backdated to the start of October 2020.

The Government must fight for an extension of the local authority waiver on rates for tourism businesses until the end of 2021. It must ensure that clear progress markers are put in place to support the change in restrictions. Aside from hotels, so many businesses were left out of the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS. The wedding industry, which I mentioned recently,

is on its knees. Pubs are also on their knees. Restaurants have been closed for nearly 12 months since March 2020. Many of these services will never reopen and many of the people working in them will not have jobs to go back to. Last night I spoke to a woman who works in a retail business in a town in west Cork. She asked me if I think she will have a job to go back to when the level of restrictions eases. My answer to her was that I do not know.

The most important issue we will have to face is people's psychological well-being. Some people who live alone have had their lives upended for the past 12 months. While they may put on a brave face, issues of isolation arise. Some have serious financial issues and that is not helped by the banks turning down loans to people because of the industry they work in. Unfortunately, this is an all-encompassing problem that goes well beyond the financial. The upheaval we have all faced has been tremendous. To be candid, it is not just hospitality, it is everyone in the service sector.

We are talking about mandatory quarantine, but we must look at the rules and regulations and there must be a line of appeal. We must have an appeals mechanism in the laws we are implementing. There is a difference between what Ministers say and what happens on the ground. A few months ago I asked the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, in the Dáil if students could travel from their homes to their accommodation. To be honest, she was sarcastic and argumentative. She lacked any knowledge of the travel restrictions at the time. From what she told me, students could travel to their accommodation. She asked me not to be causing problems that are not there. When I passed on her so-called advice to a certain student in west Cork, the student then travelled to her accommodation. The bus was stopped *en route* by the Garda and they severely reprimanded the student and told her they had better not catch her on the bus again. The Minister of State obviously did not have her facts right. That is the type of confusion and lack of communication from the Government, which has gone on for too long and has led to people being scared and angry. People are able to fly into this country but at the same time people cannot travel beyond 5 km from their home due to the rule in that regard. There is a lack of clarity in the restrictions, largely due to the fact that the Government has no idea what it is like for regular people on the ground. A couple of weeks ago-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I will talk about the rest of the issue later.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am pleased to be able to speak on the Bill. It is something that should have been done back in April 2020. On behalf of the Rural Independents I attended the briefings with the then Taoiseach and Dr. Holohan and others. I sympathise with Dr. Holohan on his recent bereavement. Every time we met, I asked why we were not closing the borders. The response I got is that we could not because we are Europeans. When I pointed to what was happening in Poland and Hungary I was told to stop.

We are punishing the ordinary people. Many of them are terrorised. RTÉ radio is terrorising them hourly not to mind daily. The former Teachta, George Lee, has found his true vocation in trying to scare the life out of people. It is not balanced, logical or fair. The Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, have been ham-fisted in the way they took over from the previous Minister, Deputy Harris, and the then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar. They have dropped the ball spectacularly. That is more than evident from the Minister's appearance on Claire Byrne Live on Monday night. Thankfully I did not see it, but I heard enough about it. It is shocking that a Minister for Health would be

so ill-informed, out of his depth, inadequate and poor. That has been the *raison d'être* of the Government since it took over.

The Minister closed St. Brigid's Hospital in Carrick-on-Suir, which had been designated as a step-down facility in March or April. The hospital was closed in the middle of a pandemic. Who in their right mind would do that? The Government is throwing money at every kind of problem, but it has treated the people with disdain and contempt. People's inalienable rights under the Constitution have been trampled on. The little green book has been shredded. This is more of it here today.

I have very mixed ideas about this Bill because it has gaping holes in it. It will take another six weeks at best before it is implemented. We will be into the summer season and people will be coming in from all over. The country is porous. The Government blames the Border with Northern Ireland, but people have been flooding through the ports and airports. The Garda Síochána is confused. Spokespersons from the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, and the Garda Representative Association, GRA, know nothing about it. As Deputy Michael Collins stated, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, gave information here that was totally erroneous and quite stupid and people are expected to deal with it. I do not know. We have tabled several amendments which will be moved later on Committee Stage. I am glad they were accepted but the question is whether they will be reached given that the Bill is being guillotined. We have such limited time to debate the drastic measures contained in the Bill. There are gaping flaws in the drafting of the legislation. I expect it will be challenged everywhere, including in the courts.

Industry is being crippled. I came across a case recently in my constituency of a man who is very depressed by the situation. He is going for private mental health care and it will take him more than 12 months to get help. Does the Minister realise that? The man is paying for it. That is not to mention the people who are suffering in the public system. Cancer patients are of concern. We heard this morning on "Morning Ireland" that people who were due to be called for BreastCheck appointments this month will more than likely only be called in 2022. There is misdiagnosis and people are full of fear and anxiety.

The Government's handling of the vaccination programme is a thundering disgrace. I put a question to the Minister last November and again three weeks ago, and I will put it to him for a third time. Deputy O'Dowd was lecturing us here about how well the Government is performing and how good it is. The vaccine has been rolled out to the equivalent population of one county. I put it to the Minister last November that 2 million flu vaccines had been bought but the Department could only account for 1.4 million. I asked the Minister to prove me wrong on that. How are we going to be fit to roll out the vaccination programme? The Minister said we have ordered 10 million vaccines. Did he go outside the EU? We are always being the good boys of Europe but we are only getting the crumbs. Did we try to source vaccines elsewhere? A doctor's practice in Cahir did not get the vaccines on Wednesday of last week. It was due to get 120 vaccines but they never arrived. Let us imagine how those people, some of them elderly, felt who were ready to come and had been telephoned. There is a 100-year old lady, bean i dTiobraid Árainn, a wonderful woman in her 101st year, and her son rang me the other day asking when she would get her vaccine. She was one of the patients of the doctor I mentioned. The same situation of vaccines not arriving occurred in a practice based in Carrick-on-Suir and south Kilkenny. Anyone can make a mistake, but people have no idea where the vaccines went or when they will get them.

Carers and other people are in vulnerable situations. I spoke previously about one young lady, Valerie, in Carrick-on-Suir in Tipperary who had a serious accident and has her own care team. She employs them privately. She wants the vaccine, but she cannot get it. She is afraid her carers will get Covid or she will get it, with lethal consequences. The bungling and misappropriation of vaccines was endemic in the HSE ever before the so-called pandemic.

The Irish people are being punished for the abject failures of several Ministers for Health and the HSE. The Taoiseach set up the HSE some years ago, so he is hardly going to disband it even though former Taoisigh, Ahern and Cowen, told me they were disbanding it because it was dysfunctional. It has gotten more dysfunctional. There is a lack of accountability. Millions and millions are being fired at problems now. Money is no problem for whatever work is being done. I know from contractors that it is a case of getting in, doing it and spending the money. There is no accountability whatsoever. The fact is that the Minister has had 12 months to put extra beds and facilities in place, but he never did one thing. There might be an extra five or six beds. There is no capacity. The sum of €1.4 million was spent on St. Michael's in Clonmel but the mental health institution has been closed up and a mental health patient will not be allowed in it even post pandemic.

The Minister will go down in history. I will not even say it. It is the season of Lent and I will be charitable. The Minister is not at the races. Someone said that the horse has bolted. The horse is in Cheltenham, if not even farther away. Members of this House went to Cheltenham last year but one can be sure that no Deputies will go this year if the festival is held. There has been reckless behaviour while people are obeying the restrictions, doing everything right and still seeing the flouting of the laws, including what has happened in the mosques recently, which are freely open even though we could not get ashes in a church in Dublin last Wednesday. We saw what happened last Thursday in Rathkeale, where hundreds of people were involved. We are told that these are minorities that we must respect. They are flouting the law and telling the Irish people to lie down, and to hell with the daoine óga or the daoine beaga, and to let others do what they like in other areas.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I will take up where Deputy Mattie McGrath left off because there was much parish pump politics there about the daoine óga. A total of 4,237 people have died over the past 12 months. This Sunday marks the anniversary of the first case of Covid. This time last year, I used to turn off my television and radio when I heard about the Covid pandemic because it was happening in a province in China. Then, like a bolt of lightning, it swept across Europe and the wider world and it reached our island. In the past year, 4,237 people have lost their lives as a result of this pandemic. I have not enjoyed anything that we have done here over the past 12 months in the context of decision-making, lockdowns and all the policies that have been rolled out by Government and those who support it. I have not enjoyed lockdown or any measure that has restricted civil liberties or resulted in an action that has inhibited how we live our normal lives. Much of what we have done has been necessary to save lives, however. We saw in Great Britain, just across the water from us, how there was a phase of denial for five or six weeks early on following onset of Covid and how this led to a dramatic upward trajectory in the number of deaths. More than 120,000 people have died in Britain.

I want to address some of the elements of the legislation we are debating. As matters stand, the quarantine will relate to people coming here from 20 countries but there is scope for the number to increase. The position will be closely monitored by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. It is important that we look at current and up-to-date data at all times when making decisions in this regard. We have heard from NPHET and the health experts, who

have guided us through all phases of this, that we are not configured as a nation to have a zero Covid policy. We are ahead of many European countries in bringing forward this legislation.

There are things that I think we need to look at as a matter of urgency in tandem with everything else that is before the House today. PCR testing will be a built-in feature of the system being rolled out under this legislation. The cost of a PCR test varies greatly across the European Union and the rest of Europe. In North Macedonia, the cost of a PCR test is €35 but it is between €120 and €150 in Ireland. It is the same test. It is the gold standard in determining if one has Covid or not, yet the cost varies significantly.

The backlog of mammograms and other health screening tests was addressed on “Morning Ireland” for a considerable time earlier. For every person detected with breast cancer, 90 or more have gone through the screening system in good health. Their health is not overly jeopardised, yet many are waiting to be screened to rule out having breast cancer. Every resource needs to be thrown behind that.

There is logic to the 5 km limit and I know that it is subject to review on 5 April, but many people tell me that it is mind-numbing. The reality is that there is so much shut down, including shops, retail, hospitality, etc., that there is little to do when one leaves one’s home and drives across the country. It can be mind-numbing, especially in rural Ireland, to drive two or three crossroads away from one’s home and have to turn around and go back again. That should remain subject to review but this legislation is important.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** I am glad to have the opportunity to make a few points. We all support the legislation to introduce quarantines. I take the view that if we are doing it, we should do it for everybody. During the week, the Tánaiste said that if people are coming from the Isle of Man, there is no Covid there and we do not want to hold them up. The primary issue for me is trying to get back to some level of normality for people who are suffering. All of us, and particularly young people, have had enough of all the restrictions and the difficulty, worry and pain of Covid. Even though it is destroying our aviation industry and so on, if we are implementing a quarantine, we should do it for everybody.

I reiterate my view about whether we have pushed the boat out with our neighbours, particularly the UK. We appreciate that if it has a surplus at the end, it will give the vaccines to us. We have ordered 18 million doses. The issue is delivery dates and scheduling as opposed to supply. The Minister said that we have our orders in and I appreciate that. Is it not possible for those countries that are in a flusher situation to effectively lend us 2 million or 3 million doses which we can replenish in April or May when they come to us, so that we can ramp up here much quicker?

While the manufacturers were saying at the beginning, based on clinical trials, particularly the Pfizer trials, that there needed to be three or four weeks between the first and second injections, the UK, Israel and the United States went a different route, deciding on 12 weeks. Their data are based on many millions of people, much more than in a clinical trial, and they have adopted a 12-week approach. According to the Scottish data which were published the day before yesterday, 84% efficacy was proven. While I appreciate our Chief Medical Officer and deputy chief medical officer saying that we needed to stick to the rules and that we should stick to the three weeks for the maximum possible efficiency, other countries have taken a calculated risk and it has worked. If we did the same here, we could double or triple our rate of vaccinations and get to that level of protection, at 84% efficacy, that has been achieved in Scotland, the UK,

the US, Israel and elsewhere. I appeal to the Minister to do that. The evidence is there now and it can lead to a much earlier timeframe for having all of our people vaccinated, which has to be the priority because it assists us in getting back to some level of normality.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** We have seen for a long time the mixed messages coming from and the kite-flying engaged in by the Government. This is not a game between the Taoiseach and Tánaiste to get the message out first and then to undermine each other. The people are worn out with conflicting information and off-the-cuff announcements. People's mental health has been affected. There is a large audience every time the Government announces new restrictions. This is not because people want to see "The Micheál and Leo Show", but because people have a real interest in the impact that these restrictions will have on their daily lives, whether it is when they will see their parents again, when they can go back to work, or where they will be in the vaccine roll-out. The questions are endless. It is time for the Taoiseach and Tánaiste to put away their egos, to stop this one-upmanship and to put the people first.

For the sake of the mental wellness of the nation, the Government needed to set the record straight this week and end the spin, leaks and uncertainty. Unfortunately, this did not happen. The time for talk is over. Talk is cheap and real action is needed. The public does not want a pat on the back and platitudes, and to be told that people's mental health is being minded when the reality on the ground is different. People do not want to hear that we are all in the same boat when some are in yachts, some paddle their own canoe and some even prefer boats that leak. Many people I have spoken to feel that they have been thrown overboard by this Government and left to fend for themselves. In fairness to the public, they have been brilliant in playing their part in suppressing this pandemic. They have jumped through hoops and have made great sacrifices in trying to suppress the virus. Some nine months ago, the National Public Health Emergency Team called for the mandatory quarantine of passengers. This did not happen and we are now fighting new variants of this virus. We have gone from a crisis to an emergency under this Government. We cannot drive 5 km to see our parents but we can fly into this country with relative impunity. Half-cooked measures just will not work any more.

If this Government is serious about tackling this emergency, it needs to support the Sinn Féin amendments. These include a requirement for all people arriving to have a post-arrival PCR test and to extend the quarantine requirements to all arrivals into the State, not just those from the 20 states designated. I heard the previous speaker, who is of the Minister's own party, support these measures. I hope he will support the Sinn Féin amendment when the vote comes. Not only are we not all in the same boat but it looks like we are not all on the same plane either. I sometimes question whether we are even on the same planet.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. While I welcome the introduction of quarantine, I deplore the fact that it is being introduced on a piecemeal basis. This makes absolutely no sense in light of the serious threat we face. A previous Fianna Fáil speaker used the term "bolt of lightning". There was no bolt of lightning here. To go into the background to this, on 11 February 2020, more than a year ago, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a public health emergency of international concern. On 27 February, the first case in Northern Ireland was reported. On 29 February, the first case in the Republic was reported. Significantly, there is no 29 February this year. On 11 March, almost a year ago, the director general of the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. He said that it is "not a word to use lightly or carelessly." He also said the WHO had "been assessing this outbreak around the clock and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction." I draw the attention of both

Ministers, whom I welcome to the Chamber, to that latter point. That was on 11 March last year. Alarming levels of inaction were being spoken about a year ago.

We ignored the existing structure that was in place for dealing with emergencies, the name of which I have forgotten but I will come to it in a minute. We simply bypassed and ignored it without explanation. We ignored the fact that public health was at a crisis point both in the hospitals and in the regional bases of the public health service across the country. This area was totally at a crisis point and still is, with a postponed strike pending. We ignored the report on public health. It is more than a year later. We did nothing throughout the pandemic, not to mention having done nothing when the report was published.

A year later, we still have no clear message or strategy and are relying on the roll-out of vaccination, which is only one part of what should be a zero Covid strategy. We have been laughed at for suggesting this but I do not think it is a laughing matter. An awful lot of very respected people have been completely ignored in this regard. These include Dr. Gabriel Scally, who has almost been sanctified in his own lifetime for his work on the cervical smear debacle, which is very unusual. His views have been utterly ignored. He has been a consistent voice in saying that this must be treated on an all-island basis with regard to the ports and airports and that we must take a zero Covid approach. He is utterly ignored when it suits the Government to do so.

Appalling messages are coming out. I am glad the Minister for Justice is here today. The Minister for Transport and the Taoiseach should also be here because this is an extremely serious matter. One year later, we are going to look at quarantine. The figures are startling but, before I come to them, I will say that the manner in which announcements have been made is simply unacceptable. I will not waste my few minutes going through them. There was an announcement made through the *Irish Mirror* and another through Raidió na Gaeltachta. There was also the Minister's debacle on "Claire Byrne Live" and his comments on Twitter at 12 midnight while a Minister of State said something completely different.

All the while, there is no enforcement with regard to passenger locator forms, an operation which has now been privatised. There has been no oversight over self-isolation over the last year. Untested troops are going through Shannon Airport, yet this Government saw fit to follow up on social welfare recipients. We ignored direct provision and nursing homes. I am on the record as having continuously highlighted the issue of nursing homes since as far back as March. We ignored the Covid committee set up to monitor the situation. None of its very good recommendations have been implemented.

Today we are dealing with a report from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, which highlights serious concerns with regard to human rights arising from draconian legislation. I put my name to that legislation, most reluctantly, on the basis that there would be some *quid pro quo* and the Government would come back to us in an honest manner and deal with issues in the Dáil, rather than in the *Irish Mirror* or on Raidió na Gaeltachta, cé go bhfuil meas an-mhór agam ar an raidió. This is the place for announcements to instil confidence in the people. We are dealing with the people in a draconian manner with increased fines while putting an extra burden on An Garda Síochána. At a point when our relationship with An Garda had made a turn for the better, we are making the lives of gardaí impossible.

I hope the Minister will accept the amendments which make quarantine absolutely mandatory for all travellers into the country with a view to dealing with the pandemic.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** We can reach zero Covid. We can, and we could, if the Government would just put the health and well-being of all of the residents of the country before business interests, profits, lobbyists and, it seems, the European Union.

I was inclined to support the Bill before us today but now I am not so sure. The Health (Amendment) Bill 2021 will belatedly provide for mandatory quarantine for some people coming from designated countries. It will also provide for mandatory quarantine for people who arrive in the country without a negative PCR test. The Bill could really be known as the shutting the stable door once the horse has bolted Bill, seeing as how some of us have been calling for these measures since May last year.

The Government knows that I am a proponent of a zero Covid strategy and that I have been since last October when we were in the midst of the second wave. The third wave, since our so-called meaningful Christmas, has been more deadly and devastating than everything else we have had to endure since March last year. At our weekly Business Committee meetings, I have pleaded each week for the Oireachtas to properly plan for the months ahead, correctly saying that there was no point in planning week by week as there would not be any significant change to the lockdown for a number of months.

There are now a number of new variants of Covid-19, or SARS CoV-2, in the country. The most dominant strain on the island is now the highly transmissible UK variant. There are at least three other variants outlined in the Bill. I do not agree with the names of the variants being specified in the Bill as we have absolutely no idea what other variants of this virus could arise. Any legislation we introduce now should have the ability to address any future variations. I have studied SI 53/2020, the Infectious Diseases (Amendment) Regulations 2020, and I ask for reassurance that any and all variants will be covered under the extensive list.

I do not want to be too negative. I was dismayed to hear media reports that the Brazilian variant could possibly be immune from the current vaccines. Surely, we cannot know that yet. I do not think it is fair for such speculative reports to be broadcast in our media as things stand.

The feeling of hope around the vaccine roll-out is palpable. It is wonderful to see people sharing images of their vaccination certificates or of their family members' joy in getting the vaccination. The Government and HSE need to improve their communications around the importance and safety of the vaccines. Now is not the time for misinformation or conspiracy theories. I also would like to see a far speedier roll-out of vaccines, but would not we all? That is out of our hands. Given how atrociously the UK Government handled the start of the pandemic, it is strange to see it plan for a summer reopening. I suppose that is the benefit of having a health system like the NHS; public health works when it is needed. Alternatively, it may be down to the fact that it is only giving one dose of vaccine to its citizens. We do not know if that decision will come home to roost. We have to see what the story is in that regard.

I welcome the foresight of the Government in introducing a three-month sunset clause as set out in sections 9(3), 9(4) and 9(5) of the Bill. I was actually pleasantly surprised to see some provisions with which I agree in a Government Bill. It makes sense that these measures would be reviewed on a three-monthly basis. It has been positive to see the position of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, on the calls for mandatory quarantine. Of course, we do not want to infringe on people's rights, but we have a responsibility to protect people's lives, health and livelihoods. The ICCL's submission sets out the balance that could, and should, be met in this regard. We can do both and it is vitally important we do so. All travellers to the island should

have to quarantine.

*11 o'clock*

I do not agree with the notion of designated states which may pose a high risk to this State or where there has been sustained human transmission. One thing we know about this virus and its variants is that it is highly transmissible and highly dangerous. Surely the Minister would agree that anyone travelling from anywhere with any instances of Covid should have to quarantine. Indeed, in some of the countries requiring quarantine there is a very low incidence of Covid but for many countries with a very high incidence, we are not providing for quarantine at all.

I also take umbrage with the wording in subsection (25) of Section 38B which states that a dependant person means “a person who is 18 years or over and is suffering from a mental or physical disability”. Does the Minister not listen to people with disabilities and advocacy groups? Has he not seen the Disability Is Not a Dirty Word campaign? Disabled people are reclaiming the term “disabled” and highlighting that it is society, policies and infrastructure which disable them and limit their abilities. Cultural change is needed and if the Government does not use inclusive and person-centred language then what hope is there for wider change?

I would like to briefly mention that it is completely unacceptable that developed countries are swallowing up all available vaccines. In order for the vaccination programme to be successful, it must be rolled out worldwide. We have a moral responsibility to share vaccines with developing countries and I was glad to hear Dr. Mike Ryan of the WHO outlining the importance of this.

In essence, I am not sure I will be supporting this Bill because although it will implement some of the measures I have been calling for, it does not go far enough. We are a year into this pandemic and people need leadership.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. I do not have a principled opposition to quarantine. I would be nervous about how it will be implemented, the effect it will have and whether quarantine centres themselves will become hot beds for transmission but I would not have a principled opposition to it if I thought it was the solution. I certainly do not believe that the quarantining that is being proposed in this Bill is the solution. If we could stop everybody coming into this State then we would stop coronavirus from coming into this State and more importantly, we would stop variants coming in but I am not convinced that we can do that.

I note the Sinn Féin amendments to the Bill which extend quarantining to everybody coming into the State but I am not entirely clear as to whether this includes those coming across our land border with Northern Ireland. There is no point in stopping people coming in at a port or an airport and not stopping people coming in across the land Border. I appreciate that Sinn Féin aims to abolish that land Border and see reunification of this State. I am asking whether it supports the quarantining of everybody, just until national reunification, because otherwise it is pointless.

A lot of what we have done to date has been based on a paucity of information. Whatever we introduce must be effective. To be effective, it must be necessary, proportionate and evidence-based but there has been very little evidence on anything with one notable exception that I wish to single out, namely the All Ireland Infectious Diseases Cohort Study in conjunction with the Irish Coronavirus Sequencing Consortium which clearly demonstrates that travel is an

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issue. I do not wish to misinterpret the findings of that study but it seems to me that while it is important to stop Covid-19 cases coming into the State, it is even more important to stop new variants coming in. The only way to do that is to test everyone coming into the State because at least then we would know what is coming in.

The Bill provides that we would quarantine people who have come directly from or have been in states like Brazil, Malawi, Mozambique or South Africa in the last two weeks but does not acknowledge the fact that somebody coming here from France may have been in contact with somebody who was in Brazil or somebody coming from Newry may have been in contact on a farm with somebody from Brazil. The idea that where somebody has been is indicative of whether he or she may have the virus is not credible. We must start with testing everybody. I have been calling for everybody to be tested since last May. We require people to be tested before coming in and that is fine. However, a negative PCR test does not mean that a person has not been infected after it would have become detectable by that test or that he or she is not bringing in a new strain or mutation which could affect immunity acquired through having contracted Covid-19 and recovered and, perhaps more importantly, immunity acquired through vaccination. So far most, if not all, of the vaccines being administered in Ireland seem to work on any of the strains identified to date. However, there is always the possibility of new strains and one of the vaccines in use is less effective on the South African and Brazilian strains in particular.

We need a science-based approach rather than a morality-based approach. I fear that there has been a lot of the latter and a tendency to want to purge ourselves of this virus. Unfortunately, this is not a morality tale but an exercise in science. I greatly welcome the scientific studies that have been done. They have been very clear that quarantining will work if properly implemented but it must apply to everybody coming into the State. I do not think it is feasible to quarantine everybody coming into the State. It is simply not possible because it would have to include everybody coming in at every entry point, including from Northern Ireland. Therefore, we must start with testing everybody coming into the State because that is feasible. At least then we would know what we are dealing with.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. First, I wish to say that it is regrettable and a sad thing to hear that the Minister for Health had to erect a security fence around his house.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** We stand in solidarity with the Minister. There is no place for that in Irish society. We can have our differences in here but respect must be shown to people's families and children-----

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** And to people themselves.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** -----and to people themselves.

We live in an Ireland where people are coming in and going out. I spoke last night to a young couple in Donegal. They are living in a caravan that is damp and are expecting a baby on 1 April next. They cannot get an electrician for two days to finish their house out in the countryside in order that they can live in it. We live in a country where a person who was roofing a house in Portumna was told by a member of An Garda Síochána to go. We live in a country where a group of workers from Northern Ireland can come down here every day, go into every

shop in this country and work on a social housing scheme under contract to the Irish State but Paddy, in this country, is now considering going across to England to work because sites have been shut down. I spoke to small subcontractors last night who are on the verge of going bust because of the regulations here. I know of a 150-acre field in Dublin that one would need to send a drone across to see someone but the site has been shut down. What is the mentality? Have we become so cowardly that we cannot make a decision on what is right or wrong? Are doctors going to be allowed to say, "I do not know much about building but I am going to shut it down"? We need to wake up and cop on to the plight of our own people. Builders and construction workers are like birds; they go where the work is. They are leaving this country in droves because England is at full bore and there is no point in staying. We must also remember that there are companies in Ireland employing electricians who go off to work for three weeks and come home for one. Will they not be allowed to see their families?

I am not opposed to quarantine - let me be very clear on that - but what is the point of it if I can go to France, meet people there who jump on a plane and come to Ireland and then jump on a plane and go to England? If we are doing this, we need to do it right. It should be full duck or no dinner. We either do it right or forget about it all together. We have been talking about doing this for so long now. I listened to a programme this morning on quarantine and if we do not do it right within the hotels, we will have an even bigger problem. I heard Professor Luke O'Neill talking about the fact that when one opens the door of a room where a person is quarantining, the virus can come out at one. We are not set up for this. We need systems that pull the air away.

We are proposing a system whereby people coming from 20 listed countries must have everything in place in advance or they cannot come. It is almost like the requirements for animal exporters. However, if people are coming from somewhere else, they can shoot in, show their PCR test and away they go. We need one system or the other. I do not blame the Minister but the big problem is that the way the EU has gone about doing its deals has been an unmitigated disaster. If we went down to marts in Castlerea or Roscommon, got some of those dealers and brought them to deal with the vaccine suppliers, we would have got better results. We should be looking outside to see if we can do deals with whosoever have vaccines. From what I see, some of those in Europe do not have a clue what they are at.

I ask the Minister and the Government to give consideration to the construction sector. Many people do not understand all the elements of this situation. The Government has not gone to the banks. The banks are not granting moratoriums, even though it has been stated by Europe since after Christmas that the banks should give moratoriums to help with the situation in countries. The banks have given the two fingers to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, as usual. Either this House or the Central Bank needs to rein in the banks.

People do not understand that we need subcontractors to do the groundwork and shift the muck in the construction sector. They have major payments to make because their equipment is leased. There is no moratorium in place in that regard. Everybody is talking about the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and all of this kind of stuff coming out. Let us drill down, however, into what payments these people have. There is nothing contained in those payments to help these subcontractors.

I appeal to the Government to consider the construction sector. One would nearly have to throw the virus at one person roofing a house in Portumna to infect him or her. The statistics in this regard should be examined. In one industry in this country, 800 people were infected

within one week.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** I thank Teachta Fitzmaurice, but his time is up.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Meanwhile, there were about 22 infections with the virus in the construction sector. Have we lost the courage to make decisions because we got a bite on the arse at Christmas? I was one of those people who said we should then open up things. I put my hand up in that regard. However, I ask the Government to not lose courage and for its members to stand up and be counted. Getting one bite of a dog does not mean just giving up as a result.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I welcome this opportunity to examine the Health (Amendment) Bill 2021, which provides for the establishment of mandatory quarantine for travellers arriving into the State in order to limit the spread of Covid-19. I thank the Ministers present and their ministerial colleagues in the Departments of Health and Justice for their efforts during this global pandemic. I equally acknowledge the untimely deaths of the 4,237 people who have succumbed to the virus in Ireland. Once again, I offer my deep condolences to all those who lost loved ones during this pandemic.

Like everyone in Ireland, I am extremely grateful for the efforts of our front-line healthcare workers, who have worked so tirelessly and diligently to keep people safe over the past year. Thankfully the numbers of people hospitalised due to Covid-19 have reduced and other indicators are beginning to become more regular and normal, which is encouraging. However, we cannot let our guard down and it is right that we continue to suppress the virus during the month of March. This will ensure our GPs, nurses and medics can continue to roll out vaccinations without the pressure of dealing with a fourth wave of cases.

News this week that 82% of adults will be offered their first jab by the end of June is very encouraging. I also welcome the changes to the vaccine roll-out sequence to prioritise people with a high risk of complications from Covid, including people with serious underlying conditions. However, more must be done for carers in particular, as the Minister will know, and these people should be categorised as essential workers. I ask for that situation to be reviewed. The roll-out of vaccines with GPs has been going well but not surprisingly, there have been teething issues. Some people are being asked to travel excessive distances. In Dublin, people aged over 80 years old have been offered vaccinations in the Helix in Dublin City University, DCU. This is an excessive journey for some people. We must look at having more local hubs. I ask the Minister to examine both this issue and the reports of vaccinations not arriving at GP practices and appointments being cancelled at short notice.

While the vaccine is being distributed and Covid case numbers are low, we must make every effort to avoid importing new cases. This is where this new Bill comes in, as a proactive measure to introduce mandatory hotel quarantining to provide an extra level of protection against new variants entering from high-risk countries. The main aim of the Bill is to amend the Health Act 1947 to provide for mandatory quarantine in designated facilities for people travelling into the State, particularly from certain areas where there is significant transmission of Covid-19 or variants of concern.

Rightly, the Act leaves the designation of high-risk category 2 countries to the Minister for Health, which will allow him flexibility to add new countries when necessary. The list has 20

countries and passengers who arrive from these countries are subject to stricter quarantine requirements and must complete 14 days of quarantine. I also welcome the three-month sunset clause, which will ensure this necessary but extremely strict law will only continue as long as is absolutely required.

I conclude by asking all Deputies in this House to be cautious about the language they use concerning international variants of Covid. Talk of people from Brazil, for example, who it should be noted are legally resident in Ireland, importing the P1 variant to meat plants and other places is regrettable. This kind of inflammatory, socially divisive rhetoric should be avoided. I thank the Minister for introducing this important legislation and I hope it will be supported by all Deputies.

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I thank the House for the opportunity to speak on the Health (Amendment) Bill 2021. The Government this week took the decision to extend significant restrictions. This was not a decision we took lightly but while reflecting on a number mentioned by many Deputies today, namely, those 4,237 people who have died because of Covid-19. Everything we are doing is to keep that number as low as possible. However, our schools are beginning to reopen and we will again review the current level of restrictions in April. It is our firm hope that we will then be in a position to ease and relax some of these restrictions but we ask people to continue to abide by them until we get to that point.

I know that we are asking a huge amount of people and that the public rightly expects the Government to keep our side of this bargain by protecting us from Covid-19, while also looking beyond the pandemic. In that sense, I appreciate that many people, Deputies and Senators have wished to see legislation passed to allow for mandatory quarantining in designated facilities. It is important, however, that this is done with the utmost care and attention to detail. One year ago, it would have been almost inconceivable that we would be in a position where penal regulations would be in place to bar people from travelling to airports and ports or that we would seek to place individuals entering our country into a mandatory quarantine system. It is essential we remember how extraordinary a step this is and that the legislative basis for doing so is rooted in public health grounds. That is firmly the basis of this Bill. The public health advice is clear: everybody should avoid non-essential travel completely.

This legislation is being undertaken by my colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. I sincerely thank him and all his colleagues in the Department for all the work they are doing and will continue to do to try keep us safe during this pandemic. Officials in my Department have worked closely with their colleagues in the Department of Health on the drafting of this Bill and we will continue to provide assistance and support. There is ongoing co-operation between our Departments, and more generally across Government, as we continue to deal with the unprecedented challenges presented by Covid-19.

The extraordinary nature of the battle against Covid-19 and the efforts of all of us in this House to keep the public safe are reflected in the extraordinary measures contained in this Bill. Although we are introducing mandatory quarantine to protect public health, we must strongly consider the civil rights and liberties of those we are asking to quarantine as we take this step and as we consider how to put these measures into operation. We have had to do that every step of the way with all of the measures we have introduced in the last year.

As it has throughout the pandemic, An Garda Síochána is continuing to support the public health regulations through a graduated response and in keeping with our country's long history

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of policing by consent. This approach has seen the Garda use the four Es approach, namely, to engage, explain and encourage and, only as a last resort, to enforce. As many Deputies are aware, the Garda is already implementing a system of fixed-charge notices for those found in breach of those Covid-19 regulations which have been designated as penal provisions. This system allows for a speedier system of fines, without the requirement for a person to be brought before the courts and prosecuted. More than 9,000 such fines have been issued to date, including more than three hundred €500 fines for non-essential travel to airports or ports. Those fines have unfortunately only been issued in the last two to three weeks. I urge people who are thinking of travelling where there is no need to do so to not travel. Many people leaving and coming back into the country are Irish citizens who are resident and working here. I encourage them not to travel.

We have introduced mandatory PCR testing for everybody entering the State, mandatory quarantining for everybody entering the State and we are now introducing mandatory hotel quarantining for those coming into the State from at-risk countries, and the Minister will have an opportunity to extend that list, but also for those who have no PCR test. We are the first country in the EU to introduce this type of hotel quarantine. It is important to note that those who are serving their period of mandatory quarantine have committed no crime. It would, therefore, not be appropriate for members of An Garda Síochána to provide a permanent presence at such locations. However, where issues arise and where there are public order incidents or attempts to breach the regulations that are in place for public safety, my Department and An Garda Síochána will provide assistance.

I assure the House that there is ongoing co-operation between An Garda Síochána and the Government on Covid measures and other issues. Officials in my Department are in daily contact with Garda management and, as Minister for Justice, I speak regularly to the Garda Commissioner. Contact between the Department and An Garda Síochána includes consultation on any measures the Government is considering to protect public health and how such measures will be put into operation.

The Government's aim in taking this very serious step is to ensure that, insofar as possible, we avoid the possibility of Covid-19 being reimported to Ireland through different variants while we are in the process of bringing down our numbers and implementing the vaccination programme. This would undermine the many sacrifices that people have made to protect the most vulnerable in society. This is a very important protection but, as I mentioned, it is really important we ensure that our legislative approach reflects the balance between the protection of public health and the constitutional freedoms that all legislation must respect. I believe this Bill does so and that the measures will remain in place only as long as public health circumstances require.

We all acknowledge that people throughout the country have made very significant sacrifices in the past year, with lives and businesses put on hold. However, as the Taoiseach said this week, the end is in sight if we stick with the guidelines a little longer. I thank again the Minister for Health and his team for the considerable work that has been done on this legislation. I urge all Deputies to support the Bill.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I acknowledge the extraordinary sacrifices that Irish people have made in responding to this pandemic over the past year. During that time, their constitutional and personal rights and their civil liberties have been significantly infringed and, in many cases, fully restricted. The people have gone along with that because they recognise, to a large

extent, that those restrictions have been necessary in our ongoing battle against this pandemic. As politicians, however, we need repeatedly to acknowledge that sacrifice and to recognise that the actions we are taking are having a significant impact on people's lives. One reason that people have grown increasingly frustrated is that they perhaps perceive that the body politic is slightly too casual in imposing restrictions on them. I do not agree but it is important that we repeatedly recognise and acknowledge that these are severe restrictions on their rights.

The rights of citizens have been infringed in that their movement and ability to earn a livelihood have been restricted and their ability to engage in the types of entertainment they want to engage in has been severely curtailed, as has their ability even to form personal relationships. It was important today that the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission published its report and I urge the Minister to take on board many of its recommendations. Citizens have had their rights significantly restricted, and while they are prepared to go along with that, they do not want the political system to interfere with their rights in a casual way or in a way that takes this interference for granted. We are all aware of the significant impact the pandemic has had on public life and the lives of people. We referred to the 4,200 people who have died as a result of the pandemic. People are prepared to have their rights and liberties restricted but we need to ensure that is not done in a casual way.

I have spoken repeatedly in the Chamber since last May about the significant and extraordinary impact the restrictions have had on the lives of children and young people. They have been impacted much more than any other group in our society. Their education and employment have been interfered with. We need to put a greater focus on them as a priority in our response to this pandemic. It is not just me who is saying this. I ask Deputies to take on board the statement by the Ombudsman for Children two weeks ago that, in the future when we look back on this time, people will say adults let down children.

We need to take into account the sacrifices that people are making when we consider this legislation. I am supportive of introducing mandatory quarantining because such draconian measures are being imposed on Irish citizens, so it is not too much to ask that we impose restrictions on people travelling into this country from other jurisdictions. It is also important that we know the reason we are introducing this mandatory quarantining. It is not for the purpose of trying to stop Covid coming into Ireland; the virus is here already. The purpose is to try to stop variants coming into the country that will have an impact on our ability to respond to this pandemic. We need to recognise that although we are preparing for what is happening in the immediate future, we also need to prepare for next autumn. We need to put in place measures now to ensure that if some variant is not responsive to the vaccines, we can respond to that next autumn without the necessity of reimposing draconian measures.

I emphasise that there is hope out there. Part of the reason that people are finding this so frustrating is they are concerned about there being a lack of hope and that it is inevitable that we will have rolling and continuing lockdowns, which will prevent people from living the lives they want to live. Hope is on the horizon in the form of vaccination. The vaccination programme in this country is going well and will be very effective. When we get our elderly population, our population in nursing homes and our vulnerable population vaccinated, we will see a remarkable transformation.

I mentioned that young people have been severely restricted by these restrictions, but it is also the case that very many people over the age of 70 have been locked up for a year. It is too much to expect that once they are vaccinated, they will be required to remain locked up. They

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probably will not tolerate that. People in their 70s are aware they have a limited number of years left and want to get out and live their lives, as does everyone else. We need to recognise, therefore, that once vaccines are administered to people over the age of 70 and to the vulnerable, there will be an unquenchable desire to get out and enjoy freedom.

We need to be realistic with the population about the impact of the vaccination. It will have a very positive impact on hospitalisations and deaths. Results from Israel and Imperial College London reveal that it is having a significant impact in reducing the number of hospitalisations, serious illnesses and deaths. Nonetheless, no vaccine will be 100% effective, so we need to be aware that even after the vaccines are rolled out, there will continue to be positive Covid tests, people will continue to go to hospital as a result of Covid and, unfortunately, people will also continue to die as a result of Covid. We need to be realistic about this because if we are not and if we do not talk about it, we will lull people into a false sense of security that the number of Covid deaths will drop and stop immediately once the vaccination programme is rolled out.

We also need to examine how we will manage through March and what our timelines are for when we get to 5 April. As politicians, we all know that March will be a very difficult month. We have seen an increase in the number of representations from citizens who are simply fed up and concerned about the impact this is having on their elderly family members and their children and younger family members. As a Government, we need to offer them a practical lifting of the restrictions on 5 April. Obviously, everyone is aware that we have to try not to let our guard down during March and I believe the majority of people will do that. They are committed to ensuring we get the figures as low as possible, but they have to be given some hope for the future. As I have said previously, we need to get children back to school as quickly as possible. I welcome that they are starting back next Monday. All children should be getting back to school in the next two weeks. We are damaging them, and we need to get them back to school.

On 5 April, we need to ensure that we let people out so that they can play their sport, not just children but elderly people who want to play golf or people who want to take exercise and play team sport. We need to recognise that we have to live with some level of risk. Yesterday, Denmark announced it was lifting restrictions significantly, but its government expressly stated it is taking a calculated risk in what it is doing because it recognises it cannot keep restrictions in place indefinitely.

We also need to look at the areas of tracing and testing. At present, it appears that our tracing only goes back 48 hours. We need to focus on that more. If the vaccination programme works and we see a reduction in the disease because of vaccination, we will need to be careful of new variants coming in. The way to be effective and careful in response to new variants is by having a very effective tracing system that goes back more than 48 hours.

We need to start to be more receptive to immediate antigen testing. Obviously, I appreciate that PCR testing is a more reliable way of assessing and appraising the extent of infections. However, for the purposes of opening businesses and getting our lives back to normal, we need to use immediate antigen testing. Let us not be too concerned that it may not be 100% effective. We know it is largely effective in identifying people who are infectious.

I believe we have hope in the future. The Government has a responsibility to ensure that a single message goes out to the Irish public. I welcome that politicians and representatives from NPHET were on the same platform the other evening and that should continue. One of my regrets is that we allowed the situation to develop from last March where we had two alternative

sources of authority coming from the State. That is not a good idea. The State and Government need to speak with one voice on this.

I commend the Minister and I will be supporting the legislation, which provides flexibility to allow us to respond to variants as they come in.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** As the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is leaving, I take the opportunity to join Deputy Fitzmaurice in saying that the situation he and his family faced is regrettable and needs to be condemned. There is no place for it in our society. Criticism of Ministers is one thing, but targeting of a home like that is unacceptable.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan made an interesting point about what we are asking of the Irish people and what we are asking of people taking flights into this country. It is welcome that people in government are making that point. Unfortunately, it has taken far too long for Ministers to hear that point and for action to be taken in this area. People feel enormous frustration and anger, particularly this week. There is a sense of drip feeding, confusion and contradiction. Even when things are announced the public do not have much faith that that is what will happen because so many things have fallen through or are being delayed.

We had the fiasco with special education in January. There is not necessarily much confidence that we will see success with schools in the coming weeks. I certainly hope that we do, but people have an attitude that they will believe it when they see it. That is caused by the poor communication and co-ordination on the part of the Government, and the feeling that there is a profound lack of leadership. That is really aggravating people because they feel they have sacrificed an enormous amount over the past year and the least they deserve is a feeling that there is a plan, a strategy and a coherent approach to get us out of this. People are angry that they are hearing such information, which is crucial to their lives and impacts on their liberty and their enjoyment of so many aspects of their life, through side comments and interviews rather than being addressed directly.

I welcome some movement on the hotel quarantine plans, but it is a day late and a dollar short. I am alarmed that it is taken so long for the Bill to come before the Dáil. NPHET first recommended mandatory hotel quarantining on 8 May last year. There has been a delay of 293 days in the Minister’s drafting this legislation and bringing it before the Dáil. All sorts of reasons were advanced as to why that was the case. However, I agree with Deputy Jim O’Callaghan’s point. When we are asking people to make such enormous sacrifices, it is incomprehensible that such a lax approach is being taken to an area of such high risk as international travel, particularly given the impact that variants from different parts of the world have had on the trajectory of the disease, and the impact they could have on hospitalisations and indeed death. The risks that are involved in not managing international travel well enough are enormous.

Even after today, this system will not be in operation for some weeks. It is simply not good enough. Mandatory hotel quarantining for arrivals from only 20 countries is not sufficient. This legislation does not go far enough. It is difficult to ask the public to continue to make the enormous sacrifices they have been making, including staying at home under level 5 restrictions and doing all that they can to ensure that Covid does not spread, when the Government is not doing all it can to stop Covid and its variants coming into the country. My colleagues have submitted amendments that would see these provisions extended and I hope the Government will consider them.

Travel restrictions will have a severe impact on the aviation sector. Government and the European institutions need to ensure that the aviation sector, particularly outside the major capitals, is supported. I have been raising concerns about my local airport, Cork Airport, for several months. About 2,200 jobs rely directly on the airport with a further 10,000 jobs relying on it indirectly. There are workers who are on the breadline and put to the pin of their collars. We need additional Government support. Travel restrictions, while necessary, will obviously have an impact on airline workers, ancillary staff and all airport-connected workers. We need to act swiftly to protect these workers and their families. Wage supports alone are not enough. The Government cannot continue to ignore the plight of aviation workers. They need payment breaks from lenders. They need protection from credit rating impairment. They need tailored supports, particularly workers facing possible further job losses.

The Government needs to use the €245 million connectivity fund to support the aviation sector. To reach its full potential, Cork needs a viable international airport. We need to ensure that airports such as Cork Airport are protected in this context and I ask the Government to ensure that is the case.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** It is nine months since NPHET recommended that discretionary elements of travel should end, which is nearly 300 days. Consistently, throughout this crisis, NPHET and others have called for real checks and controls at our airports and seaports. In April of last year, Sinn Féin called for a quarantine regime for people entering the State. On 5 May, I stated in the media that our failure to impose New Zealand-style entry restrictions was undermining the efforts to combat Covid-19, but nothing was done and so here we are today with the Government eventually trying to do something about it.

The Bill will not deal with the entire threat of the importation of this virus from outside the State. While people throughout the State adhere to public health measures, people are coming into and going from this country at their leisure. Dublin Airport is in my constituency and hardly a day goes by that I do not get phone calls from people working in the airport or living in the environs of the airport, advising me that people are tripping through the airport. We have seen it on RTÉ's coverage, and we know it is happening. The Bill does not go far enough in addressing what we all know is going on. We have had enough time to get this right, but the measures proposed do not go far enough. We could have asked numerous countries for advice on how to implement this system. I am sure that officials in Australia or New Zealand would have been happy to provide direction based on their experience in this regard.

Why does the Bill not come under the remit of the Minister for Transport, with the support of the Minister for Justice or a Minister of State in her Department? We can argue about how well we think the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is doing his job - I have my own view on that - but what help is he getting from his Government partners? According to media reports, Fine Gael Deputies and Senators are slating the Minister at their parliamentary party meetings. Yet at Cabinet, when the work needs to be divvied up, their Ministers go missing and he is left holding the baby.

The only thing that is going to get us out of this Covid crisis is the vaccine, yet the vaccination roll-out here has hardly been an unqualified success. According to some of the newspapers, in the North the jab has been given to over 25% of the population, while we are not even at 5% yet. Last year, there were some cutting words bordering on xenophobia from politicians and some in the media about the virus in the North. It seems the cat has got their tongue now.

The decision was made by the Government to hand the procurement of the vaccine over to the EU and there has been much revisionism about this matter. We were told we were too small a country to do it on our own and yet Israel, which has only a few million more people than we have, has vaccinated 49% of its population. Was it too small to arrange the vaccine for itself? Furthermore, the fact remains that health is a member state competency and the EU has no experience in this area. It has no experience in delivering healthcare so we can hardly be surprised by the delays. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has admitted that the EU initially ordered too few vaccines but the question remains of what the role of our State was. What was the role of our EU Commissioner? What was the role of our European officials? This is being questioned across Europe, in Germany and in other places. If we do not assess the situation and learn from the mistakes that were made, the worry is that this will further hinder the vaccination roll-out. I will say this very clearly: we want the vaccination roll-out to be a success but it will not be if we do not learn the lessons we need to learn.

I cannot speak here today without calling out what went on last week with the leaks and rumours coming from the Government about the restrictions, schools, reopening and quarantine. Some of those leaks were true but more of them were false. Did anyone in the Government stop for a second or pause to think about the impact that was going to have on people? People are hanging on their every word and yet they are glib and relaxed. They have a *laissez-faire* attitude to these leaks. People at home are watching every single word and it seems no consideration is given to that. The public are absolutely committed to defeating this virus. They have made huge sacrifices and have risen to the challenge at every stage in the battle against Covid-19. They have not flinched and they have been equal to the task but this has put a huge strain on their physical and mental health. Their commitment and well-being were disrespected by the actions of the Government last week with those leaks and rumours and the kite-flying. The constant leaking and a lack of clarity from the Government has put a huge strain on people's emotions. It has created significant stress for business owners and, indeed, for workers. I call on the Government to introduce an official protocol for relaying Covid-19 announcements, which specifically precludes unofficial leaks. It should set a time and date to come out and talk to people. It must stop leaking and making people unnecessarily worried.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The Minister came in here yesterday and said that quarantine measures were being brought in to protect the vaccine programme in order that it is not undermined by new variants. What the Minister has failed to acknowledge is that a limited list of countries is not good enough. We need all people travelling from all countries to be quarantined on arrival. That is the only way we can provide protection from new variants getting into the country.

Ordinary people have done their best. People have stayed home and kept their businesses shut. They have been out of work. Parents have kept their children in and they have had no schools to go to. These people want the Government to provide safety and to keep the variants out. Last week, over 10,000 people flew into this country. The Taoiseach said that half the people who came into the country in January were coming back from holidays. We knew there was a Brazilian variant at the time. We knew there was a risk and yet this Government, and the Minister, let 1,500 people travel in from Brazil. What happened then? Three cases were confirmed coming through Dublin Airport and there could be more. People are angry at the Government's failure to solve this problem. People are angry at the Government for failing to prevent new variants coming into the country. A lady called Margaret from Dublin Hill in Cork rang me this week. She is a pensioner with underlying conditions who has been a prisoner in her own home - her words, not mine - for a year. She cannot understand why the Government

has taken a year to bring in an action that is too little, too late. We need everyone to be quarantined on arrival.

We also need an all-Ireland solution. We need everyone to work together on the island of Ireland, irrespective of politics. This is about public health and safety. The Taoiseach needs to step up. He has damaged relationships with some of our partners in the North. We should be strengthening our ties because at the end of the day, we are all in it together on this island. Covid-19 does not recognise party politics, the Border or partition. If we are going to get ahead of this virus, we must not recognise them either and we must work together.

The Taoiseach stood in front of the country two days ago and said that he understands how hard this is but I do not think he does. People are hurting. They are angry, nervous and scared by all the mixed messages and the leaks from different people trying to beat each other out to the media. We want to support the Minister. We want to support the Government, because at the end of the day this is public health and we are all in it together, but not with the way the Government is behaving. This Bill does not go far enough to deliver what we need.

An hour ago, Munster Post Primary Schools GAA cancelled its 2020-21 season and it will not be the only school organisation to do so. All the different sporting, cultural and arts programmes are closed down at the moment. Children, people with disabilities and the elderly have been the most affected by Covid-19. There is so much more I could say but I will just give the Minister one statistic. Merchants Quay Ireland found in its research that four out of five people it interviewed had relapsed into addiction during the Covid-19 crisis. That says an enormous amount. We are bringing amendments forward and I hope the Minister will accept them because we need to get ahead of this.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** This Bill is long overdue. It has been nine months since NPHET recommended putting restrictions in place to limit travel into this country, as my colleagues have stated. The Government sat on its hands and did nothing, allowing dangerous variants into the country. The Government must accept Sinn Féin's amendment to introduce mandatory quarantining for all non-essential travel from all countries, not just an obscure list of mostly African countries. I would like to know what criteria were used to decide on that list. We owe it to everyone, especially our older people and those with underlying conditions who have stayed in their homes for almost a year now, to get this right.

There are many concerns about this legislation. The logic of the published list of countries is non-existent. We are proposing to quarantine travellers from African countries, many of which have had fewer than 10,000 cases of Covid-19 in total. Burundi has had a total of 2,041 cases and is 178th in the world for Covid cases. The Seychelles have had 2,514 cases and are 172nd in the world, while eSwatini has had 17,000 cases and is 124th in the world. It is a small country of just over a million people in southern Africa, beside Mozambique. I wonder how many people from eSwatini will not travel to Ireland because of mandatory quarantining. Ireland's total number of cases, at almost 217,000, is more than 20 times that of the average African country. Meanwhile, we are allowing travellers in from Britain, which has had almost 20 times more cases than Ireland, and the United States, which has had 133 times more. According to figures released by the Department of Health, around half of those arriving into the country by aeroplane at the end of last month were doing so for what were deemed to be non-essential reasons.

People are worried about these new variants, especially due to reports that they spread more

quickly and may be resistant to vaccines. While speaking about vaccines, I must mention that the only public vaccination centre in County Kildare is in Punchestown. County Kildare has a population of almost 250,000 and it is the fifth biggest local authority area in the State. We need another vaccination centre, one that is on a public transport route and it needs to be central.

We still do not have mandatory PCR testing for people travelling into Ireland; it is only advisory. This is not good enough. Ordinary people are sacrificing so much to beat this virus. People's lives are on hold, all in an effort to stop the spread, and they are being let down by this Government in that it will not make the right decision. We need to ensure there are adequate human rights protections and mental health supports in place for those who will enter mandatory quarantine. I hope the premises to be used for quarantine have been properly informed. We need to ensure we do not see a repeat of last week's situation, where the Seven Oaks Hotel in Carlow had not been fully informed that it was to be a vaccination centre and when this was pointed out, it was dropped from the plan.

We need clarity from the Government around what criteria will lead to a reduction in restrictions. What levels of cases, vaccinations and R number are required in order that we can drop down a level? Everyone is confused and hanging on the every word of Ministers in interviews. We are becoming more confused and angry as time goes by. We need to see that the plan is not being made up as we go along. We need the Government to share it with us, inclusive of the data that will tell us when we can see light at the end of the tunnel. I am asking the Minister to do this.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am required to call the Minister now because this debate is to conclude at 12 noon. The Minister has less than ten minutes.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I was told I had ten minutes. Is it possible to get ten minutes?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are not ten minutes remaining owing to the way in which the debate was run.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I wanted to try to address as many of colleagues' concerns as possible. Is it not possible to get ten minutes?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Leaders' Questions are scheduled for 12 noon.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I understand; I just wanted to check.

I thank colleagues for their contributions today and yesterday. It is clear there is strong support across the House for hotel quarantine. Many issues were raised during the debate, with a variety of positions given. Some are calling for quicker opening up, others believe the balance is about right and necessary and others believe that further measures are needed and for longer.

A common issue raised was the number of countries to which the requirement for hotel quarantine applies. There is a lot of interest in this issue. It has been suggested by some that more countries need to be added to the list of 20 countries currently designated by Ireland as category 2. Some believe there should be a blanket ban for all countries globally. Some have stated that they will be opposing the Bill because the list of 20 countries is insufficient; they want it to be significantly more. It would be incorrect to suggest that the legislation is limited to these 20 countries. The legislation specifically empowers the Minister for Health to designate

additional countries on the advice of the chief medical officer, where the evidence so justifies. The currently designated states - the 20 we are discussing - are the states currently advised to me by the chief medical officer, and which I have designated as category 2 states.

Section 38E(1) empowers the Minister for Health to designate in writing additional states, “where there is known to be sustained human transmission of Covid-19 or any variant of concern or from which there is a high risk of importation of infection or contamination with Covid-19 or any variant of concern by travel from that state.” It covers a very wide range of risks from Covid and from variants. Any measure that requires mandatory quarantine must be proportionate to EU law and the Constitution. A proportionate approach necessarily requires the designation to be evidence-based. This is precisely what the Bill provides for. The Bill also provides that this can be done without delay; it simply requires a designation in writing by the Minister for Health. In essence, the Bill before us allows for any state in the world to be added to the system of hotel quarantine in a way that is in line with EU law and the Constitution and is done on evidence-based public health advice. I would hope that colleagues in the Dáil, whether seeking a list of two, 20 or 100 countries, believe that the approach we are taking provides that it could be 30, 40 or 50 countries so long as that is the public health advice based on evidence, which gives it a firm legal standing. That, I think, is an approach that we can all back. I would love to see us all back it.

NPHET is meeting today - that meeting is taking place now - to review the latest international data. Later today, I will be meeting with the deputy chief medical officer to discuss if we should be designating additional states, other than the 20 provided for. If that is agreed, it can happen very quickly. I want to give colleagues a sense of the mechanism we are trying to put in place here. We are not trying to limit this to 20 states; we are saying it will apply to any state anywhere in the world where, based on evidence, the chief medical officer identifies there is a risk. That is then notified to the Minister for Health, the Minister makes a designation in writing and that state then falls immediately under the hotel quarantine regime. I ask colleagues to think that through. This is being done in a legally robust way, which I know we all understand is important.

Should the Bill pass, we will have a robust system of hotel quarantine, certainly by European standards. No EU state has mandatory hotel quarantining in place for all international arrivals. No EU state has quarantine requirements for those without symptoms of greater than 14 days. This information may have changed. I had a briefing on 12 February. My reading of the situation is that ours will be the most robust hotel quarantine system anywhere in the EU, closely aligned with what is in place in the UK, which is important as we look to an all-island approach and as close to a two-island approach as possible.

In the time available to me, I would like to try to address some of the other issues raised by colleagues. A question was asked regarding people arriving into Ireland and travelling on to Northern Ireland. It was suggested that such people should be included in the system of hotel quarantine as they have to travel across Ireland. I can confirm that such people are included. Similarly, those arriving in Ireland who transited through Northern Ireland are also covered by our hotel quarantine system.

A question was asked about seasonal agricultural workers and whether they would be exempt. The legislation provides a short list of travellers who will be exempt. The list does not include essential workers as a category. The legislation gives the Minister for Health the power to designate additional classes of travellers and the subsection refers to persons who perform

essential services, but it would not be envisaged that people in that category, who could pre-book, would have to be included.

An important question was raised around mental health supports for people in hotel quarantine. There is an awareness of the need to have regular check-ins with travellers in quarantine, which could identify issues with health generally, including mental health. The provision of on-site medical care is envisaged as part of quarantine. Should additional supports be required, I assure colleagues it is possible under this legislation to make arrangements for that provision.

This Bill is the latest measure being proposed by the Government on border controls. Currently, there are multiple controls in place. There is a fine and-or prosecution for non-essential travel and hundreds of such fines have been imposed. This Bill will increase that fine from €500 to €2,000. A preflight PCR test is required. Failure to produce this can lead to prosecution. The numbers now arriving without such tests are very small. The Bill requires any such person to stay in a designated quarantine facility until such time as he or she has had a not-detected PCR test. Mandatory home quarantine for all arrivals is in place. This is being enforced by the Garda and failure to comply can result in prosecution. Quarantine is required for 14 days for category 2 states, but this can be relaxed following a non-detected PCR test on day five for non-category 2 states. This Bill introduces hotel quarantine in addition to that for the category 2 state arrivals. Genome sequencing has been very significantly ramped up and includes targeting of positive test results for those who have been in category 2 states. Travel visas have been suspended from a number of countries.

*12 o'clock*

I acknowledge the significant work done since the recent Cabinet decision. This is complex and sensitive legislation. The establishment and operation of a system of mandatory quarantine, including at designated facilities, is complex and sensitive. We all agree with that. The work to date has required input and efforts across Government. I thank my colleagues, including the Ministers for Justice and Transport, Deputies McEntee and Ryan, respectively, both of whom are here, as well as the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, and others for all their work. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until immediately prior to the taking of Committee Stage.

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

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Impím ar na Teachtaí go léir cloí leis na srianta ama. Please stick to the time.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** D'inis an tAire Sláinte dúinn sa Dáil inné go bhfuil idir 1,000 agus 3,500 duine ag taisteal isteach go hÉirinn achan lá. An tseachtain seo caite, tháinig 10,500 duine isteach trí Aerfort Bhaile Átha Cliath amháin. Tá muintir na tíre glasáilte taobh istigh de shrianta 5 km agus ag an am céanna tá daoine ag teacht isteach ar saoire chun na tíre gan chosc agus gan bhac. Níl pleán an Rialtais maidir le coraintín éigeanteach fada go leor agus tá sé sin soiléir. Ní maith ar bith leithjab a dhéanamh agus coraintín in óstáin a chur ar fáil go héigeant-

teach do chúpla duine as cúpla tír ar fud na cruinne. Tá Sinn Féin ag rá leis an Rialtas go soiléir go gcaithfidh coraintín éigeanteach in óstáin a bheith ann d’achan duine atá ag taisteal isteach go hÉirinn gan cúis riachtanach.

Yesterday, the Minister for Health told the Dáil that approximately 1,000 to 3,500 people are arriving through Irish airports each day, with approximately 10,500 people arriving into Dublin Airport alone last week. Most right-thinking people would find these figures concerning and disturbing in view of the great sacrifices many have made during the past year, particularly in recent months. It makes no sense to people that they cannot travel beyond 5 km yet those who travel to Ireland on their holidays can arrive in the State virtually unimpeded. That is the policy the Government intends to pursue with the legislation before the House and that it will press ahead with this afternoon. The Government intends to introduce mandatory hotel quarantine for arrivals from 20 countries, only two of which, it should be noted, have direct flights to Ireland. Rather than taking any meaningful action to prevent the importation of new strains or variants, the Government is putting in place a system that we know is unfit for purpose. This is absolutely bizarre and unacceptable. There is no urgency or meaningful action. In fact, this is a dereliction of the Government’s duty.

The Minister for Transport bears responsibility for this. I am sure the Minister will respond by stating that new countries can be added to the so-called red lists and so on. On what grounds would they be added? Once a cluster of Covid-19 or a new strain develops in a given country, we know that the virus spreads before it is identified. The Government approach amounts to locking the stable doors after the horses have bolted. What is the logic in this approach? I cannot get my head around it.

The Government has a choice today. Amendments have been tabled. I am sure the Minister is aware of the amendments Sinn Féin has tabled. We want to work constructively. We want a system that works and that ensures the best protection for the people. One of our amendments is to ensure that anyone coming to the State, irrespective of which country he or she is travelling from, will be subject to mandatory hotel quarantine. We are of the view that such quarantine should apply to all non-essential travel. That is what is needed. That is what the people want. Will the Government accept the amendment, particularly as the system it is proposing will not work?

Mandatory quarantine in one’s home is farcical and unenforceable. The Minister said last weekend that gardaí are already carrying out checks at people’s homes to ensure they were quarantining after returning from abroad. Yet, the general secretary of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, Antoinette Cunningham, stated on RTÉ radio yesterday that her members do not have a clue what the Minister was talking about. She said that there has been no consultation, guidelines or operational instructions in respect of that role. Can the Minister respond to that? This is a holy mess. If gardaí do not have an idea about what they are supposed to be doing, how can anyone else have one? The only proper way to deal with this is to ensure mandatory hotel quarantine for non-essential travel. Will the Minister accept the reality that this is what is needed?

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** We agree on this: we have to reduce right down the volume of people travelling in and out of this country and to restrict and stop non-essential travel. That is what we are doing and what the Garda Síochána is doing. As I understand it, the Minister for Justice will have all the details in terms of those being fined at our airports for doing exactly that. The latter is a clear signal that this is not simply advisory.

We are saying that there should not be any non-essential travel. Where people do come, I believe it is appropriate to set up the hotels under the legislation that just completed Second Stage. The legislation caters for those coming here from the designated countries to which the Deputy referred and makes provision for those travelling from other countries to quarantine at specific houses. That is the approach we are going to take.

In the case of people coming in without providing polymerase chain reaction, PCR, tests, gardaí are checking on them in their homes. This does not happen in every case because the Garda authorities have made decisions on how to use and deploy resources. A Garda spokesman confirmed last night that this is what is being done. I expect the Minister for Justice will also ensure that the resources are deployed. I believe it is appropriate to do what gardaí are doing. They are doing a really good job at Dublin Airport and elsewhere. Several thousand fines have been imposed on people who are not abiding by the guidance and rules that are in place.

The Deputy seemed to criticise us and indicate that we may adjust the rules depending on health advice, but it is health advice that we are following. We are following the best advice from the World Health Organization, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and our national health authorities. I heard Mike Ryan address a conference organised by the Royal Irish Academy some weeks ago. When asked whether we could simply stop everything in terms of travel and whether it would work, he said “No” and indicated that the focus should be on acting fast where variants of the virus are identified and scaling up the genome sequencing testing, which the Government has done. We are now meeting the European standard whereby 10% of all PCR cases tested are checked for genome sequencing. This follows World Health Organization and European advice. Similarly, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control set out its advice on the Monday before last and we are following that pretty much to the letter.

I am of the view that what I have outlined is appropriate. It is particularly appropriate in our circumstances because there are two jurisdictions on this island. That gives rise to certain considerations in terms of how we manage travel. I believe the approach we have taken whereby we are working with the UK Government is appropriate. We are taking this approach because we do not have a Northern Ireland counterpart with devolved powers in respect of travel. We are working in co-operation on the basis of a two-island strategy which allows us to minimise risk. The UK authorities are following a similar strategy to ourselves. It is not exactly the same, however. In that context, different health authorities will identify different countries or different risks. The two strategies are similar and have similar back-up rules in terms of fines and so on. I believe the approach being taken is appropriate as we roll out the vaccines.

One thing is absolutely clear, and I agree 100% with Deputy Doherty on it. The large amount of travel taking place for non-essential services has to stop. That is why gardaí are outside the airports issuing €500 fines. We have to police this and ensure that anyone who comes in without a PCR test is checked up on. This is done on the basis of random checks on people in their houses. It is one of the series of measures we need to put in place.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** We should call a spade a spade. Mandatory quarantine in a person’s home will not work. It is not quarantine. Garda sergeants and inspectors have come out and said they do not know what the Government is talking about. This is what Garda sergeants and inspectors are saying when the Government claims this is being followed up on and that there is a robust system in place, when everybody and their dog knows there is not. We are an island nation. We have an opportunity to do our best to support the efforts that are happening in

the community, valiant efforts by people who are making huge sacrifices. Since as far back as May of last year, we have been asked to remove the discretion in relation to international travel and the Government has failed to implement it. We must ensure every person who comes into this island for non-essential travel should be subject to mandatory quarantine. That is something which is within our gift. Can we ensure new variants stay out? No, we cannot but we can do our damndest to ensure we do everything in our power. Will the Government finally accept the wishes of the Opposition and of the Irish public and do the right thing by introducing mandatory hotel quarantine for all non-essential travellers?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** My understanding is that what we are actually doing now is very similar to what was in that letter from back in May of last year. It applied to non-residents of Ireland. The traffic coming in and out of Dublin Airport is mainly Irish residents. There is hardly any traffic coming out of any of the other airports, or indeed seaports: it is down to nil pretty much. I understand that back in May of last year the health authorities were suggesting a very similar approach to what is being taken, namely that non-Irish residents, travellers from the rest of the world, would have to have a designated place to quarantine. For those countries where there is a risk of the variant - it is for the health authorities to identify those - that will be a hotel, in other cases it will be the designated spot they provide in their passenger locator form. On the question of speed, since the variant became an issue just before Christmas, we immediately stopped all international travel from the UK initially as it was the high-risk area, we immediately put in place the requirement for a PCR test before anyone comes here and we have worked in absolute lockstep with the health authorities and with NPHE to implement the category 2 designations. We are completely at one with the health authorities on the management of this.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** The new plan to deal with Covid was announced on Tuesday and we face a minimum of another six weeks in lockdown. The expectation was that by the end of February we would be down to between 200 and 400 cases per day but it is much higher. The strategy announced for reducing the numbers appears to lack a strategy and relies instead on people doing more of the same. People are losing hope. They are dejected and increasingly feel the Government is not in control, that there is a half-hearted approach, a pat on the head and to keep to the level 5 strategy. It is not convincing people. People are openly saying this is the worst Government we have ever had at a time when we need a Government to pull together. We can see, for example, that there is a spike in the case numbers among 18 to 24 year-olds. Is there even a public information campaign planned? We can see there are still problems in the meat plants. What is happening? What is the Government doing to address that as part of a strategy around workplaces?

We were recently told by the Taoiseach that there was going to be a scaled-up track and trace system that would look back 14 days. When the system nearly collapsed last October the Tánaiste told us that a track and trace system only works when the numbers are low enough. The Government must tell us what case numbers we need to get to in order to have a track and trace system that is effective and looks back 14 days. Poor communication is not just about mixed messages, contradictions and a whole lot of things like that - it is also about what we are not being told.

We need to see an actual roll-out plan for the vaccine as well. I know it depends on supply, but surely there is an indicative plan, a wall planner, showing on a weekly and monthly basis who gets the vaccine and when. Surely there is a personnel plan showing how many people we need and what locations they are needed in. Is the Minister satisfied and has he seen that plan

himself? After the track and trace system last year, I want to see the plan. I want to see it so I can believe it. I am sure the public want to do the same.

On what happened over Christmas with the UK variant, it was here before it was identified. The levels of the virus in the UK, particularly in England, were huge before the variant was identified. There is now a variant in California which is rapidly spreading. People are not convinced by the half-hearted quarantine system that is being introduced as an emergency measure at a snail's pace.

Will the Minister tell me what numbers would be needed to have an effective track and trace system in place? Is there a comprehensive indicative plan? Has the Minister seen it? Will the Government publish it?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** What strategies are the Government taking to drive down infection levels in the cohort I mentioned?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Finally, is the Minister honestly telling us that the AGSI is telling porky pies?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Is the Minister is honestly telling us that that rank, that organisation-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are over time, Deputy. I call on the Minister to respond.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I did not comment directly in response to that. I think An Garda Síochána did and I will let it speak on Garda operational matters.

The Deputy made various points about testing and tracing. We get pretty much weekly updates from the special Cabinet subcommittee on Covid. On Monday this week we met with the deputy CMO, Dr. Ronan Glynn, Mr. Paul Reid, Professor Brian MacCraith and various other officials who set out what is the latest situation. I am relating what I hear at those meetings. The Deputy was absolutely right, as was the Tánaiste, about how when cases go above a certain level it becomes very hard to do the contact tracing in an effective way. It becomes so widespread they cannot drill down to check back on every single thing and follow through. We are now back to numbers where that is possible. As I understand it there are 900 people working flat out - they are flat out, they are probably worked to the bone and it has been tougher for them than for anyone over the last year. People in the health system in general have been working flat out. The tracing teams are very good at it and are following every case.

I heard on Monday that there is a significant percentage of cases, up to about a quarter, where they are finding it difficult to trace what exactly the contact is. This is not because of any flaw in their system but there is still reasonably widespread community transmission. It seems the characteristics of the new variant are such that it is very easily transmitted in a way that is not easy to do tracing. I understand a close contact is someone a person has been in close conversation with for 15 minutes or in a room with for two hours. There seems to be some incidence of transmission with the new variant where somebody outside that close contact still

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transmits it and that makes it difficult for the tracers to pursue it. However, there is no shortage of resources or effort in the contact tracing system we have. At that Monday meeting there was real concern about whether there was a plateauing of the numbers. We should never take just one or two day's numbers. We must look at the five-day average and the 14-day average. Thankfully, in the last two to three days, we have seen the positivity rate come down before 5% for the first time, to 4.6% and then 4.32% yesterday. If we can keep that down then we will have further capability to focus really tightly on where the UK variant which is dominant here is.

On the roll-out plan for the vaccine, I want to stand up for our public service and our health service in particular as they have been thrown three incredible challenges in recent weeks. The volume of vaccines we have available to us is obviously set by an EU system. The first significant challenge our health system had to address was because the system was under such stress and risk, we switched the whole vaccination programme to put front-line health workers first. That was an appropriate decision.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Second, there was the recommendation that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines be used on older people. The third challenge was because of the AstraZeneca numbers dropping below-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Minister.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** In each instance, they have been incredibly flexible. They will set out a roadmap.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are way over time. I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** The Minister is telling the House about what “they” are doing. Has he seen an actual roll-out plan? Has he seen a wall planner detailing, week by week, the various cohorts that will be vaccinated? I understand that any plan has to be indicative and I understand about the supply-side issue. Has the Minister seen the work planner in respect of the recruitment and locations that will be a counter-balance when we get decent supplies in? Has he seen any of that? Has the Government actually seen that or is it just taking on faith what it was told? We were told last year that we had a track and trace system but that system nearly collapsed in October. I want to know whether there is an actual plan that has been worked through in a detailed format and whether the Government has seen it. Can the Minister tell us whether that is the case?

On the issue of the track and trace system, I heard a Government Deputy speaking on Second Stage of the Health (Amendment) Bill 2021 this morning bemoaning the fact that there was only a 24-hour look-back. The Minister is telling us that it is possible to do a two-week look-back but a Government backbencher stated that there is only a 24-hour look-back.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Is there a 14-day look-back? Will the Minister give us the numbers that need to deliver an effective-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, please. Thank you. I ask Deputies to co-operate in terms of the time.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** We have seen all that sort of detail. What I was setting out is that I have seen how the plans had to change. It all had to be radically changed on several occasions. I believe and it is expected that exactly what the roadmap is will be set out in more detail. I think it will be possible to do that now because, for the first time, there is some sort of clarity around the international supply of the vaccine. That was not certain until now. Last week, we saw the AstraZeneca numbers change radically. The entire plan had to change again as a result. I believe there is increasing certainty around the issue for the coming weeks and, in that light, I think it will be possible for us to make public all the detailed plans that are there. The entire system is working on that and there is no shortage of resources or any other capability. I believe that plan can and will be shared, with the proviso that it may change. It may change for the better if some of the other vaccines, such as the Johnson & Johnson or Janssen vaccine or the CureVac vaccine, come into play. If that is the case, we will have to continue to change in order to advance and do things more quickly. That is what we are focused on.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Rosslare Europort is one of Ireland's most important pieces of infrastructure, particularly in the context of Brexit. In the early 1900s, the British constructed Rosslare Port having identified its strategic location as being the most accessible and closest in terms of distance to mainland Europe and the UK. Despite its strategic importance, successive Governments have failed or neglected to make proper investment in this country's most strategic port. Politicians holding senior political posts in various Governments flooded poorly located ports with millions of euro, all in the interests of political personal gain. Foynes, Cork and Dublin ports have all been beneficiaries of that strategy, to the detriment of Rosslare. Government politicians representing the constituency of Wexford have, for decades, engaged in the PR stunt of advocating the case for the investment at Rosslare Europort while privately, within their own political circles in Dublin, accepting that no such investment will ever happen because of the red herring of the ownership issue.

Since the advent of Brexit, traffic at the port has increased by in excess of 450%. We are all still at level 5 lockdown, which we hope will end soon, but there has been traffic congestion in Wexford, particularly in Oilgate. However, when we get to the summer months and the level 5 lockdown restrictions abate, from Rosslare to Oilgate will undoubtedly be more congested and that will inevitably cause delays. On Monday in the Seanad, a Fianna Fáil Senator asked a Fine Gael junior Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, for a timeline on the completion of the M11 motorway from Oilgate to Rosslare Europort. The Minister of State indicated a timeline of eight to 13 years depending on the availability of funding. In light of the consequences of Brexit, such a timeline is completely unacceptable. We need less of the PR babble and more action. What is needed is for someone to take this combined scheme by the scruff of the neck, complete the M11 from Oilgate to Rosslare and upgrade the infrastructure of Rosslare Europort to facilitate Ireland's import and export trade. The State has engaged professionals on two occasions to decide the route of the motorway, costing taxpayers double what it ought to have cost.

Has the Government no foresight? It took the arrival of Brexit for it to realise that Rosslare Europort is Ireland's most valuable and neglected piece of infrastructure, yet not one shilling has been forthcoming. There has been a 450% increase in traffic at the port since 1 January. The whole industry knew that would materialise, with the exception, it seems, of those in the Department of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and others who compiled the Irish Maritime Development Office, IMDO, report. Where is the Government's leadership? Where is the foresight that will see Rosslare as the country's main offshore wind farm and construction port? We need leadership and decision making, to be followed by the money.

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**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I agree with Deputy Verona Murphy that we need more balanced regional development. The national planning framework is a guideline for much of the work I do as Minister for Transport. It is critical to get more balanced regional development. If I recall correctly, approximately 97% roll-on, roll-off traffic comes through Dublin Port. That is an imbalance we need to address. I had a very good meeting with representatives of Foynes Port yesterday. They are looking at the potential development of container business from the port, which might rebalance things.

I absolutely agree with the Deputy that Rosslare Europort will have a critical role of strategic importance for the State, particularly because of Brexit, in terms of both the increasing travel directly to the Continent and the ongoing use of the land bridge from Wexford to the Welsh coast. First and foremost, I recognise that the staff and management of Rosslare Harbour have done a remarkable job. They have facilitated a significant increase in the number of sailings from the port and in the volume of output, particularly in recent months as a result of Brexit and the changing circumstances, and they have managed that in a way that no one could have expected. The Deputy is correct that, historically, there has been insufficient investment in Rosslare Europort. That is something we are now seeking to change. Various development prospects are being considered, including the significant development of the port as a centre for the roll-out of offshore wind industry, which offers significant potential for this country. That also may be the case for other ports. We will have to go very quickly through a process of assessing what type of investment is made and in which location, but I believe Rosslare Europort could provide an ideal location for such development.

A rail review is currently being carried out or started by the Government. That has to be included in looking at the future development of Rosslare. We need to look at the likes of the Wexford rail line and the now disused connection from Wexford to Waterford to see whether that could be a way of enhancing economic activity and social life in the south east. However, the Deputy is correct that we also need to improve road access to Rosslare Europort in light of its increasing strategic importance to the State. It takes time to build roads, which involves route selection, the planning process and procurement. There is also the issue of cost. The sections of motorway, dual carriageway or other national road which we are delivering do not come cheap. That said, I confirm to the Deputy that it is my view that it is one of the strategic areas in which we need to invest. We need to ensure we have the best possible connectivity to the Continent and other markets, including the UK. Rosslare will have a central part in that. Addressing this issue may well include consideration of the ownership issues of which the Deputy is aware. She mentioned the history in that regard. We may need to look at that as one of the elements we need to get right in the future management of Rosslare Europort.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I thank the Minister. I hope the ownership issue will be the last thing at which he looks because it is the least relevant. He stated that nobody could have expected the figures to grow exponentially from 1 January but I repeat that everybody in the industry expected that the figures would grow in that way. The only people who did not expect it, it appears, were those in the IMDO. I am glad to hear the Minister confirm that he is looking at this issue but a decision is needed imminently. There is a requirement for immediate funding of a few million euro to get this process under way and to determine that Rosslare Europort will be the construction base for the new wind farm projects that are about to be undertaken. We do not have time to spare in that regard. We have a small window in which to prepare for that; otherwise we will lose the opportunity forever. I do not accept that that can happen to Rosslare this time around.

The Minister spoke about balanced regional development. There has been absolutely no such balance up to now. It is time that the Government sees the strategic importance of Rosslare Europort, puts its money where its mouth is and invests in the port. It will take a number of years to get us to a point where we can offer the infrastructure required in any port in this country so I ask the Minister to make the most strategic decision.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I remember visiting the port in Rosslare 17 or 18 years ago when the first offshore wind farm was being built. The blades and turbines were deployed from Rosslare Harbour. It seems that the port has many of the characteristics we will need, considering the significant investment we are going to make in the Irish Sea and Celtic Sea areas. We expect an auction system early next year. Prior to that, it is critical that we get the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill through this House in order that we can set up the necessary systems. The Deputy is right that there is a tight timeline involved. The Government must act quickly and it will do so. We will make sure that the investments are in place to facilitate development, subject to proper environmental checks. It may not necessarily or exclusively happen in Rosslare because we must look at the variety of port options and different ports come with different options. We will make the best choice for the economic and environmental development of this country.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am going to talk about the 2040 national development plan as it applies to the mid-west region. The plan was written in 2015. It is like a "once upon a time" story when one considers what is needed in Limerick. The plan later became the national development plan of 2019 and then the national framework, which is now the 2040 plan. I looked at the investment projects and programme tracker in advance of Leaders' Questions. MetroLink in Dublin is receiving €1 billion. The Luas cross-city initiative has received €500 million. The national children's hospital project has received €1 billion. The greater Dublin drainage scheme has been allocated €1 billion. The Ringsend water treatment plant has been allocated €1 billion. All of those projects are to be completed by 2025. I am sure they are all worthwhile projects, but what about the rest of the country?

The Minister mentioned Foynes Port and I stated in the Dáil last week and the week before that it is the deepest port in Europe. I also mentioned the dispersion of traffic throughout the country on more than one occasion in the Dáil. The motorway from Limerick to Dublin is nothing but trucks and buses. The Minister talked about Dublin Port and 97% of roll-on, roll-off traffic is coming through Dublin. Foynes Port is a perfect answer to achieve the reduced emissions that the Minister talks about. The perfect solution for dispersion of traffic is Shannon Airport, which can cater for 4.5 million passengers but which, before 2019, dealt with only 1.8 million passengers. People could not go through Shannon because they could not get connecting flights. It was not viable to run those flights through Shannon. The Minister must look for a new chairperson of Shannon Group and I ask him to look for someone who has a track record in business, who knows the Department and how to run the airport and make it work for the region.

The people of Limerick nearly had to walk the streets again last week to get the agreement in respect of a road project that was approved in 2015. What is the Government at? Some 60% of the towns and villages in County Limerick had inadequate water supplies on Monday. The sewerage systems of 73% of the towns and villages in Limerick are at maximum capacity. The development plan states that housing and infrastructure is to be centred around towns and villages in rural Ireland but not in the countryside. The Government needs to wake up and look outside Dublin.

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**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Looking forward to 2040, we absolutely need a metro system, BusConnects, DART+ and various other projects in Dublin. My colleagues in government know that in any meeting I have, my first priority is, as I told Deputy Verona Murphy, the national planning framework. We need better balanced, more compact and low-carbon development in this country. My first priority should be to look at the likes of Cork, Galway, Waterford and Limerick and put in infrastructural investment to see those cities grow beyond anything we have seen in the past 40 years. I agree with the Deputy that investment needs to be made in Limerick and the Shannon area in general. I would start in Foynes Port where, as the Deputy said, there is huge potential and very deep waters. The port is located close to the offshore wind power resources that we know we are going to develop. That gives us the potential for industrial development in the area, using the power as it comes ashore rather than shipping it to another location on the east coast. We should put the industry where the power exists. We will need infrastructure for rail freight because I believe that zinc deposits in the region could well be used and will have to be moved by rail rather than road. We will reopen the Foynes rail line and not at considerable cost because the line is there. When we are doing that, we will look at the other four underused rail lines in Limerick and look to put in stations at key points across the city and region, including at Shannon Airport, Moyross, Corbally and a range of other stations across and around the city. That would accommodate what we want, which is transported, compact and high-quality development where we can put in new housing. That is my first priority and we need it.

We will get the metro and BusConnects and have done good work on those two. We have not done the work in Limerick yet but we are doing it now. In the review of the national development plan, it is that sort of investment that I hope turns everyone around to thinking that is the clever way of developing Limerick. We can put housing beside the infrastructure and use the advantages of the region. That would benefit not only Limerick but also the wider region because we all know that if that infrastructure is put in, tourism starts to work better to the benefit of Clare and Tipperary. Let us have a vision of a metropolitan region that would extend as far as Nenagh. There should be a fast, low-carbon electric train service. That is all doable. The planning time will not be long because the rail lines are there and all we need to do is to put in the stations. My colleague, Deputy Matthews, tells me that Irish Rail has real capability and plans that we can take off the shelf. We could do that work at the same time we develop stations in Cork. They can be delivered at low cost and built quickly because there are not planning delays and high costs. We will use the existing infrastructure well. That infrastructure was built almost 100 years ago but it still works. We can upgrade it today to make Limerick a 21st century city fit for the future.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I look forward to the investment in Limerick but, as I said, it is like a "once upon a time" story. The Minister is talking about everything but 73% of towns and villages have no infrastructure, sewerage or adequate water supplies while €4.5 billion is spent in Dublin. There are 25 other counties in the Republic of Ireland and the Government is spending billions in Dublin and throwing crumbs out to the other counties in the country. People will not be able to work in the areas the Minister is talking about. Askeaton has been waiting for a sewerage plant for 30 years. Oola has been waiting for a sewerage plant for 10 years. Twenty-one houses were built in Kilfinane and five of them had to go onto a private on-site sewerage system because there is no capacity.

I love to see the Minister's vision and hear him tell his stories but reality is reality. The 2040 plan is going to stop people who are building one-off houses and installing their own top

of the range sewerage plants that cost €10,000. Such people pay €5,000 to the local authorities because the Government has not seen the vision. The 2040 plan would be a good plan if there was the infrastructure in Limerick and across Ireland.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** One of the reasons we want compact development is because if we keep building outward, we have to keep building more and more new infrastructure. It would be far more economic for us and work far better if we build up our existing towns through a town-centre-first strategy. We must invest in all those existing sewerage systems in towns where sewage is pumped directly out. Compact development works not only because there is no time cost when one can walk to a shop, church or local pub, but it is also because we are using existing infrastructure. We are not allowing that infrastructure go to seed and then building outward. It is availing of what we have. That applies in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Donegal or wherever we are. As well as the cities we must build up, more than anything else we must address our 19th century market towns. A strategic question has been asked of whether we let them wither on the vine or if we bring people and life back into their centre and create vibrant communities. That is what this Government is going to do.

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

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have 34 names and I do not think we will get through them all. Rather than have me interrupting Deputies all the time, I ask Members for their cooperation in refraining from making statements and simply putting their question.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is hell-bent on introducing a shared equity scheme that will only push up house prices. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, knows, as we all do, that a whole generation is locked out of home ownership because of the prices that are being charged for houses. It is not just Sinn Féin that is saying the scheme will push up house prices. The most senior official in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is saying the property industry is lobbying for this because it will push up house prices and line the pockets of developers. It is the developers who lobbied for this scheme. The reason we know that is that they lobbied Sinn Féin as well. We told them to sling their hook because we knew it would lock in high prices. However, they went over to Government Buildings and got a friendly ear in the form of the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. It is not just Sinn Féin and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, but the Central Bank and the ESRI are all singing the same tune, that this policy is reckless and will push up house prices and it should not happen.

The Minister, Deputy Ryan, as leader of the Green Party, was very clear. He committed to pushing back on inflationary demand-side interventions in the home purchase market. The Green Party states in its policy document that these are essentially social transfers from taxpayers to developers and builders which are paid through increased house prices. How can the Minister reconcile that the Green Party is rolling over and allowing this Minister to introduce a policy that everybody knows is going to increase house prices?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are over time. I call on the Minister to respond.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The warnings are there for the Minister and his party to see.

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**Minister for Transport(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Deputy Doherty is right. We have to make sure this does not push up prices. That is why the ESRI rightly stated at the Oireachtas joint committee that the targeting of any market intervention is critical and that we must make sure we get this right. The key to getting it right is also what this Government is delivering after a lot of talk and promises over the years when nothing was ever delivered. It is the development of cost-rental solutions, which I believe should be central to addressing the housing crisis. The key benefit of these solutions as an intervention is that they intervene in the market to bring prices down. This approach is not developer-led; the housing is still retained in public ownership and it is social housing done in a new way. It is open to everyone. The shared equity scheme is being discussed and advanced with care to make sure it does not create further market pressures and price rises.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** We are progressing and have advanced cost-rental solutions like the one in Shanganagh on the way to Bray.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am moving on.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I believe that will be the mainstay of the-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** If we do not co-operate, nobody is going to get in. I know it is difficult. I call Deputy Alan Kelly.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I will ask the Minister about the revised reprioritisation of the vaccine roll-out through the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC. Broadly speaking, I welcome the decision, but issues arise and I want to flag them so they are nipped in the bud. In response, I want the Minister to guarantee that this will happen.

Dr. Keith Swanick in Mayo has outlined how he and a neighbouring GP received no vaccines but another neighbouring GP received 420 vaccines, despite having only 45 to 50 patients aged over 85. That cannot work out. More alarmingly, my colleague, Deputy Howlin, informed me this morning that in Wexford a childcare provider, who possibly put some pressure on the HSE, got all her staff vaccinated. These are young people in their 20s, 30s and possibly 40s. If what I have outlined in those two examples is going to continue, the public will have serious issues.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Will the Minister please engage and ensure the Government irons out these issues?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Go raibh maith ag an Teachta.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** We cannot have such anomalies happening. It is not equitable.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will commit to that. We listened to what Dr. Swanick said with real care because he was in the centre of a flare-up of cases in Belmullet, so I can well understand his frustration. I spoke earlier to Deputy Catherine Murphy about the changes to the vaccine roll-out process. This week, there was a further iteration or variation when it was decided that those people at very high risk with underlying conditions would be brought up the order and those at high risk would similarly be brought up. That was done on good, scientific health advice. We must follow such advice as the medics are best placed to make the call on that. My

understanding is that the GP system is working effectively, although there may be variations and cases where there are problems. I can cite an example of people I know where one would do it different but it is not just GPs as pharmacists will be rowing in.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister. I call Deputy Cairns.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will take that advice.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** It is essential to extend the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes so people can seek a judicial review, if required. That is a legal entitlement. It would allow the Director of Public Prosecutions to continue its investigation. If any testimonies are not recovered, survivors can seek a remedy under the general data protection regulation, GDPR, as required by EU law.

Yesterday, the Government passed the Social Democrats motion to extend the commission but it will not do it. We all know this is a cynical move to avoid the optics of Government Deputies voting against extending the commission. The Government can simply ignore it until the commission dissolves on Sunday. It is unbelievable, cynical and beyond disappointing. I do not know how the Minister will square that with the electorate, survivors or himself, but the legislation is ready to go. Will the Minister please change his approach and honour the motion that was already passed in the interests of justice and democracy?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I did not hear the interview but I understand the Data Protection Commissioner, DPC, was on the radio this morning and she indicated she would continue to work with the relevant designated data authorities for the records of the 550 or so survivors. I believe the approach the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, has taken has been correct and appropriate, which it must be.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The House passed a motion yesterday, which the Government has no intention of honouring.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The key point we want to honour is those 550 survivors and their ability to get access to data.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** They cannot take a case against a non-entity.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Cairns should not interrupt. She is using up time. Please allow the Minister to reply.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** People are always entitled to a judicial review but the Minister’s focus is correctly on making sure that the data, which are the subject of real concern, are accessible in a way that is appropriate and is in compliance with the DPC.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister. I am moving on.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** He is doing that, which is the key thing he must do.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Government’s gratitude for the heroic work our health-care workers have done to protect us all during Covid was revealed as thoroughly hollow when it voted down the People Before Profit motion in October to pay student nurses and midwives for their work on placements. What the Government did promise was a review of their allowances. The review offered them an absolutely pathetic €100 a week, but even that has not been

paid. It was supposed to be backdated, but student nurses and midwives have not got a cent. Now they are concerned that they may be punished because the cancellation of placements in January may have to be fitted in outside the college term at another point in the year. That is an absolute disgrace.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will check and revert to the Deputy on when that payment was due, why it has not proceeded and if payment was due, why it has not come through. The Government's approach is to make sure that we retain a good nurse education training system. I believe we made the correct decision strategically as a country some years ago to introduce a degree course for nurses. As I understand, the international assessment of nursing training, education and skills development shows us to be very high quality. It is a system that works.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Student nurses are living in poverty.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** No one should accept that, but in addressing it we do not want to dismantle a system that is a good one by international standards. I am open to correction on that.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I ask the Government to consider a new beef exceptional aid measures, BEAM, scheme to support beef finishers and beef farmers. They are facing catastrophic losses bringing their product to market because of falling prices at factory gates and reduced demand on the Continent due to Covid. In addition, they are dealing with rising input prices for fertiliser and meat supplements. A frozen pizza in a supermarket, by weight, sells for more than Irish beef cuts, which is a tragedy for beef farmers. Will the Minister please look at introducing a beef exceptional aid measure scheme and for urgent action from the beef task force to try to get visibility on the pricing and supply chain?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Deputy would say that I would say this but my colleague, the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, has just opened up the organic scheme. Approximately 500 or 600 farmers will be able to go into it. I mention it because I think that is the future for Irish farming, especially beef and lamb. It offers the prospect of reducing the input costs and increasing the price that we get on the market, which I understand to be patently clear, since one can see the price of one versus the other. Our food strategy is coming close to fruition now. I believe that it is in the interest of farmers to go in this green way because it is the best way of guaranteeing a price.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** Will it offset losses to farmers-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to sit down. The time for the question is over.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** On a point of order, the scheme is not open-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That is not a point of order.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** The details are not even available yet. How could it be opened?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That is not a point of order. There can be no more response to that.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I thank the Minister for meeting with the Tipperary groups last Friday night. It was a meaningful meeting with Jobs4Tipp, March4Tipp, Councillor Anne Marie Ryan and indeed the Tipperary Town Chamber of Commerce. They really appreciated it. I hope the Minister continues the collaboration in an effort to get the trucks out of the town with a ring road.

We have had bad weather in the last ten days in Tipperary. Areas of Tipperary, Cahir, Cashel, the Knockmealdowns and the Galtees were badly hit. I salute the outdoor staff and engineering staff but we need extra funding to deal with this outburst of water and flooding. It caused substantial damage and we need money for drainage. We acknowledge the annual funding we got but we need a top-up. I ask the Minister to look at it. He might meet Tipperary County Council following its request for a meeting. I thank the Minister for his meaningful involvement and look forward to the future.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I thank the Deputy. I hope that I did not get myself or anyone else into trouble. I found the meeting useful and I commit to meeting Tipperary County Council about the issue. The meeting was about the issue of roads and I was particularly interested with my own roots being in that neck of the woods. Clear problems exist in Tipperary town because of the volume of freight traffic passing through. The roads programme that we signed off on two or three weeks ago contains more than €600 million in spending. I will look at any instance where weather conditions have caused a particular local problem but in my mind, it is well-provisioned. We have increased spending for repairs and maintenance to keep a steady state condition of our roads. I look forward to meeting Tipperary County Council about similar local issues.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Over the past six or eight months, a court case was resolved regarding people who are entitled to a primary medical certificate. Following a lot of the usual spin doctoring from the HSE and Department of Health, this is open but people are not getting appointments. The HSE and Department are prioritising Covid and leaving people with disabilities unable to get a primary medical certificate. Does the Minister think it is right that we are treating people with disabilities this way and what are we going to do about it?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I understand that following a Supreme Court decision in June last year, the Minister for Finance requested that the assessment process for primary medical certificates be suspended. On the passing of the Finance Act 2020, which provided for the medical criteria in primary legislation, I understand that the Minister for Health instructed the HSE to recommence assessments from 1 January 2021. As the Deputy stated, there unfortunately were some delays in processing assessments due to the involvement of medical officers in the national Covid-19 response, as well as ongoing public health restrictions. The HSE is continuing to monitor the situation and I will bring the Deputy's comment and concerns to it following this question.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Martin Browne.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I was on the list next.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am not going to waste time. I have a list before me. Deputy Martin Browne is second on the list. That is all I can do. If Deputy Browne wants to give his space to Deputy McNamara, then so be it.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** There needs to be some degree of fairness. I have no intention of taking my seat.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy McNamara is wasting time.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I will ask my question because I took my place here at 9 a.m. yesterday to ask this question and I am here to ask the question.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am not sure if there has been a mistake somewhere.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy McNamara is wasting time. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae is at the top of the list before me. He is not here. Deputy Martin Browne is next and I call him.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** Deputy Browne had the decency to acknowledge that I was ahead of him. This is the second week running that this has happened.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask Deputy McNamara to resume his seat.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I will not resume my seat.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Martin Browne.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I raise the commitment in the programme for Government to reduce our carbon footprint. A lorry recently crashed in Shannonbridge and I have been informed that it was later discovered that the truck in question was carrying a consignment of wood pellets that had been imported all the way from Australia. I have sat in the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine listening to how the Government has made decisions which have resulted in the horticultural sector being in danger and peat now being imported from elsewhere in Europe. How does any of this fit in with a sustainable green strategy, when imports are increasing along with all of the emissions that go with that? I think the Government is having a laugh with us with regard to our carbon footprint.

Why are restrictions being imposed on Irish industries before proper thought has been given to filling the gap which is left and the impact these decisions will have on Irish businesses? The just transition fund will do precious little for many in the horticultural sector. I thank the Minister for meeting people in Tipperary last week. At the next meeting, the Minister might meet all of the stakeholders involved.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** It makes no sense for peat to be imported, as Deputy Browne said. I received figures from the Department of the Taoiseach showing that €3.5 million worth of peat was imported into this country last year. We have workers who lost their jobs during a global pandemic. It is not right. Some 17,000 jobs, or more, are at risk. The midlands are suffering adversely. The Minister needs to take on board that the transition is not fair and counties such as Offaly are bearing the brunt of empty aspirations and rhetoric. People are losing their jobs

and they have bills and mortgages to pay. I ask the Minister to wake up and take action.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Peat is coming into Ireland from five countries around Europe. This situation is meant to be the same for everyone in Europe, but here in Ireland people cannot stir because of the environmental impact assessment, EIA, requirement for 30 ha. This situation must be addressed.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** This is clear evidence of tokenism rather than real environmental action. An ideological pursuit by some of the Minister's colleagues to try to eliminate the use of peat for horticultural activities has resulted in a situation where peat is being imported. We also face the very real prospect of jobs, such as those in the mushroom sector, being exported. We could lose a vibrant part of the Irish economy when there has been no real strategy put in place to find an alternative.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I raised this issue about peat last week and about straw being put back into the ground by farmers.

*1 o'clock*

They were relying on peat for bedding and now, because of the legislation the Government is trying to introduce to require farmers to put the straw back into the ground, additional pressure will be put on them. The last two speakers are 100% correct. This all goes back to the fact that the Government does not have a clue what it is doing.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** We need a just transition for the midlands in particular and for all of those workers in Bord na Móna and related industries.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** It is not just.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** No-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will hear the Minister, without interruption.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** The Minister needs to wake up to reality.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister without interruption.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** He needs to wake up to reality.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister without interruption.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That is why we supported some 39 projects on which the Just Transition Commissioner, Kieran Mulvey, had worked with local communities. There was concern that some of these projects might not be able to qualify for funding approved by European institutions but, from what I hear, that will not be a problem for the vast majority. We will spend and invest that money and we will support Bord na Móna in its switch from brown to green. It rightly recognises that the skills it has in managing bogs can be used in this low-carbon future and that we can create employment, energy and industry on the back of that.

Peat extraction is a very significant environmental issue but it is not an issue of export. The vast majority of our peat was always exported. Most of the peat extracted for horticultural use was used by Dutch and UK growers. We have to make sure that the mushroom and horticultural industries here survive and thrive and I believe they will. We will have to look at a variety of

different solutions, including the use of imported products, and look for new substitutes but the real opportunity in the midlands-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----is in the switch to green-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----which is where the employment, investment and finance will be.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call on Deputy McNamara.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Does the Minister hear himself? We are importing peat.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Excuse me, Deputies.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** To register with the Teaching Council, teachers are required to do an immersive Gaeltacht course. That costs €1,500 and includes bed and board. That is not possible this year so they are doing an online course instead, for which they are being charged €1,300. Students on State courses will have that reimbursed but those in the private sector will not. Does the Minister accept that the charge of €1,300 for an online course is exorbitant when it is only €1,500 for a course which includes bed and board? Will he look into having this remedied?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I do accept that and I can understand the Deputy's frustration and why he wanted to ask the question. It is a fair question but I do not have the answer to it immediately. It seems unfair and I will ask the relevant Department to come back to the Deputy on it directly.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** There are reports from many GP surgeries across the State that they have not received the vaccines they were due to receive in recent days. Today in Ballyfermot, a 91-year-old woman was in a GP surgery waiting for her vaccine but had to be told to go home. That is happening far too often. Numerous other such cases were raised with the Minister today. Can he find out what is happening and can this be stopped? If it is communicated to GPs that they will receive vaccines on a given day and if older people are lining up to get them, it is deeply unfair for them to be sent home. I ask the Government to get its act together on this issue and to get the communication right. If vaccines are promised, they should be delivered.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** On the same issue, but in my constituency of Cork South-West, the roll-out of the vaccine has been very confusing to say the least. In some situations, even up to a week ago, doctors in west Cork did not even have vaccines for themselves, never mind their patients. Perhaps that has been corrected but home helps in west Cork, who are at the front line, have not yet received the vaccine. It is unbelievable to see the roll-out moving on through the categories while some in the first categories have not yet been looked after. I would appreciate it if the Minister could explain why this is happening so that I can explain it to my constituents.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I have been contacted by student nurses who are to go on placement in a number of months who have not been given their first vaccine. They have been called back a second time to be given their first vaccine. They feel embarrassed because people who

are over 85, some of whom have contacted me, still do not have a date for their first vaccination. There are vaccines in Tuam but there are no needles. There is confusion in this regard. We will not be able to roll this out within the steady timeframe required if this confusion continues.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** On the same issue, we have the same situation in Cobh. More than 60 appointments for people over 85 years to get their vaccinations were made for last weekend and two surgeries in the town did not get their vaccines. It is very confusing and disheartening for the patients. They are elderly and very nervous. There must be clarity in this regard because it is starting to cause hysteria, especially in my constituency of Cork East. Something similar is also happening in Youghal. It must be looked at.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Will Deputies Cullinane, Michael Collins and Buckley provide me with specific details? We cannot have a 91-year-old woman in that situation. I do not know the circumstances. If the Deputies will provide details, I will forward them to the HSE to try to find out what happened.

In response to Deputy Tóibín, we are in the second week of a three-week roll-out. In those circumstances, I trust and expect that if someone has not heard about their vaccination yet, they will hear about it in the coming days. If they do not, they should follow up and make sure to get it. While there will undoubtedly be cases of difficulties or shortages - one GP in Belmullet was short and received vaccines from a neighbouring parish where there was an excess - my sense of what is happening around the country is that, as soon as vaccines come in, they go out. We did 78,000 or 79,000 last week when the target was 80,000. We are aiming for 100,000 this week. It is working. There may be cases in which it is not working and we have to find and address these. The public should, however, have confidence that the system is working.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I commend the Government on making good progress on the vaccines. Some 45% getting a first dose by the end of April, 60% by the end of May and 80% by the end of June is very satisfactory. My question is on those under the age of 16, for whom no vaccine is approved. Yesterday, we saw the death from Covid of a person aged 16. I know there is no approved vaccine for this cohort but has the Government developed a strategy to keep those people safe? Should we consider vaccinating their own carers? When will the pharmacists be involved in the systematic roll-out?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** There has been a change with regard to the age rule. Until recently, the rule applied to those under 18. That change followed medical advice. I understand that the vaccine was not tested in those younger age cohorts and that is one of the reasons the vaccine is not to be rolled out to them. Their carers will all get vaccinated when their category within the order of 15 is reached. We want to get everyone, the entire population aged over 16, vaccinated. Anyone caring for those under 16 will be included. As I said to Deputy Kelly and others earlier, I expect the HSE to be able to publish the exact timetable for the roll-out, including with regard to the involvement of pharmacists, shortly.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I raise the issue of private school bus transport. Schools will be back, to some degree, on Monday and we also expect private school bus transport to return. I refer to non-Bus Éireann transport. These providers will fall very far short of the break-even point. Those working in some similar services are allowed to stay on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. I ask that the Minister consider allowing private school bus operators to stay on the PUP until such time as schools are back at full capacity.

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**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Deputy makes a fair point. I will talk to the Minister for Education, who has responsibility for the budget for and operation of the school bus service. Under the current level 5 restrictions, capacity on buses is limited. Even at lower levels, capacity is still restricted to 50%. We have provided for that but I will check and report back to the Deputy.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** Considering the great impact this winter lockdown has on the mental health of so many groups and people right across the State and given that one is more likely to meet people in Herbert Park than on a golf course or athletics track, surely one size does not fit all when it comes to sport. I ask the Minister to provide the data that support not allowing children to train outdoors in a controlled environment. People need to see those data. What preparations are being put in place to prepare for a return to sport?

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** On the same issue, an announcement was made two hours ago by the GAA that the Munster post-primary schools competition has been cancelled for the 2020-21 season. This will have a very serious effect on young people in school and the same could happen with many other sporting organisations. What plans are in place to support young people in sport and the arts, particularly in the context of their mental health? This is a serious issue affecting our young.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I agree with both Deputies. I recall that in the last long and difficult lockdown in November, we made an exception to the rules to allow young people to train and take part in sport. I do not want to promise ahead because we must wait and see what happens in the coming weeks. However, in terms of the opening up that will occur if the numbers continue to come down, one of the first priorities will be the ability of our young people to engage in sport, which is so good for their health and well-being. Our health officials recognise that and it is one of our key priorities.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes questions on promised legislation. More than 20 Deputies have not been reached.

### **Residential Tenancies (Student Rents and Other Protections) (Covid-19) Bill 2021: First Stage**

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to make provision in relation to certain tenants' obligations to pay rent in respect of dwellings used for accommodation during academic term times, to make provision in relation to the maximum period of notice required by such tenants to terminate a tenancy, to oblige certain landlords to refund relevant payments in certain circumstances relating to Covid-19, for those purposes to amend the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 and to provide for related matters.

I thank the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, and my Sinn Féin colleague, Deputy Ó Broin for the work they have done on this important Bill and the 56 Opposition Deputies who have signed it.

The pandemic has exposed the severe economic injustices students face in the rental market. Thousands of students and their families have been forced to pay for accommodation they were

prohibited from using. It is no longer acceptable for the Government to act as spectator while wholesale financial exploitation of students continues. The speedy and successful passing of this legislation is vital to ensure students of third level institutions are protected. It is incumbent on all Oireachtas members to right the wrong that has facilitated the fleecing of students and their families when it comes to student accommodation refunds. Time and time again the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, has said that he does not have the tools to do anything. We are providing him with the tools in this legislation and now it is up to him.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I thank the USI and Sinn Féin for tabling this Bill. For too long students have been treated like a cash cow when it comes to rent and rental accommodation. An entire industry has built up which is geared towards the exploitation of students in the context of rental accommodation. This Bill will tackle this issue in a real way and the Labour Party is proud to co-sign and support it. I look forward to its passage and hope the Government will not only give it a sympathetic ear but will prioritise it in terms of debating time.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** The Social Democrats support this Bill and we are very happy to co-sign it. This legislation is very important in ensuring that students are not penalised for complying with public health measures, which is what happened last year. Students who could not avail of accommodation they had paid for several months in advance were charged in full for it. In effect, they were penalised for complying with public health measures. This is important legislation and I hope there will be cross-party support for it, including from the Government parties. It is good to see Opposition parties co-operating on this and I thank Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éireann-Union of Students in Ireland for the work it has done to highlight this issue.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I fully endorse this Bill. The fact that a wide variety of Opposition Deputies have spoken in favour of the Bill shows that it is necessary legislation. I hope the Government will take that on board and ensure that young people are not screwed again as they were in the past. This is the second year in a row in which they are facing that prospect. It is an honour for me to support this Bill on behalf of my group and I look forward to its speedy passage.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I thank USI for continuing to campaign on this important issue. It is great that many parties of the Opposition are uniting to support students in order to end the disgraceful situation whereby students do not enjoy the protections to which they are entitled in terms of their accommodation. Indeed, when one looks at all of the purpose-built and extremely expensive student accommodation popping up all over the city, it is clear that a certain group of people think that students’ accommodations needs are to be exploited while their rights as tenants are denied. This Bill is an important attempt to address the unfairness and lack of protection that students are experiencing at the moment.

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

**Minister for Transport(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** No.

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 Rose Conway-Walsh:** I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

### Health (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Health (Amendment) Bill 2021. On the question, “That the Bill be now read a Second Time”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2) that division must be taken now.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 125; Níl, 5; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>		
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>		
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>		
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>		
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>		
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>		
<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>		
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>		
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>		
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>		
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>		
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>		
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>		
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>		
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>		
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>		
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>		
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>		
<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>		
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>		
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>		
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>		

<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>		
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>		
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>		
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>		
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>		
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>		
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>		
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>		
<i>English, Damien.</i>		
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>		
<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>		
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>		
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>		
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>		
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>		
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>		
<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>		
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>		
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>		
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>		
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>		
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>		
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>		
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>		
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>		
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>		
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>		
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>		
<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>		
<i>Lahart, John.</i>		
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>		
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>		
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>		
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>		
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>		
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>		
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>		

<i>McGuinness, John.</i>		
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>		
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>		
<i>Nash, Ged.</i>		
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>		
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>		
<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>		
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>		
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>		
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		

<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>		
<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>		
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>		
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mick Barry and Paul Murphy.

Question declared carried.

### Health (Amendment) Bill 2021: Committee Stage

Section 1 agreed to.

#### SECTION 2

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 1 and 31 to 42, inclusive, are related. Amendments Nos. 32 to 42, inclusive, are physical alternatives to amendment No. 31. Amendments Nos. 1 and 31 to 42 will be discussed together.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I move amendment No. 1:

In page 5, to delete line 2 and substitute the following:

“ ‘designated state’—

(a) on the coming into operation of this Act, means any country, territory, region or other place outside the State other than Northern Ireland,

(b) if at any time after passing a resolution under *section 9(5)* of the *Health (Amendment) Act 2021* both Houses of the Oireachtas so resolve, has the meaning assigned to it by *section 38E(1)*.”

Our amendment will provide for mandatory hotel quarantine for all travellers coming into the State, with the exception of those outlined therein. We will also have to deal with the issue

of essential workers. According to what is being proposed by the Government, travellers who have been in designated states within 14 days prior to arrival will be obliged to undergo a 14-day period of quarantine. They will be able to exit quarantine only if they return a not-detected Covid test on arrival and again on the tenth day of their quarantine. The rule in respect of non-designated states, however, is that travellers will be quarantined only if they arrive without a non-detected PCR test, until such a test is returned.

Our amendment defines all states outside the island as designated states. It will allow for the Bill's proposed two-tier system of designated and non-designated states to come into operation only if the Houses pass an enabling resolution and only after an initial blanket three-month designation period. This approach will ensure that all travellers are quarantined for the next three months while we fight and suppress the virus and while the vaccination is rolled out, and will allow for a review after that. It will keep out variants and provide the comfort we need to give to the people that their sacrifices are worth it.

I listened carefully to what the Minister said about what the Government is proposing. As stated previously, he should not be the Minister introducing this legislation. We are where we are, however. The Government is doing the absolute minimum on mandatory hotel quarantining. What is proposed only covers 20 countries. Why is this the case? Why is it doing the absolute minimum? The public has suffered enough and deserves to have mandatory hotel quarantining to fight the variants, giving them an opportunity hopefully to be able to move on a bit better with their lives. We should be doing everything we can to help the people we are here to represent to be able to get on with their lives. We are not going to introduce mandatory quarantine. Rather, the Government is going to try to deal with the matter by means of this minimalistic legislation. Yesterday I listened to the Minister say that the Bill is radical. What is being done in South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and other countries is pretty radical; this Bill is not radical.

There is no point in taking a half-baked approach to this matter. That is my belief and the belief of many Opposition Members. It is rare to see such unity on something, but this is it. It is my view and the view of the Labour Party that introducing this legislation will not have the desired impact. I am not sure how many people would be arriving from some of the 20 designated countries on the list at the best of times, let alone now. This is half-baked. I hope that I do not end up telling the Minister later this year that I told him so. I genuinely hope we do not end up in that place because if we do it will be very dark.

The Government is leaving gaping holes in our defence against the variants. We need to suppress this virus and try to shut it down absolutely. We all know now about the variants. We are hearing that there is now even a Bristol variant. There is a Californian variant. We know about the South African variant and the Brazilian variant that are here. As a result of these variants, we basically have a pandemic within a pandemic, a virus within a virus. This is leaving gaping holes in our defences at such a critical period when we are trying to maximise the effectiveness of our vaccine roll out. It is incomprehensible that the Government would, in an equation-like fashion, not put its own people first.

The crux of the matter is as follows. The virus and its variants are on tour. We know some of the incidence of the Brazilian variant here has been as a result of people travelling in from Brazil. If we continue to allow people to come in from other countries, including even European countries, to come here and then ask them to be honour-bound and quarantine themselves, variants will spread. The variants will spread because they are coming in already. The Bra-

zilian and South African variants do not need to come from Brazil or South Africa. They can come from London, Lanzarote or Lisbon. They can come from anywhere. Why are we not doing everything we can for a particular period in order to protect our people? Why is the following equation going against the Irish people? On the one hand, the Government is limiting everyone's travel to a distance of 5 km but, on the other, we are allowing people in from all over the world and, even though it is a legal requirement, trusting them to quarantine at home for 14 days.

There are two choices here. What is being done shows an absolute failure on the part of Government that it is choosing to go against the public. The public are behind the Opposition on this issue. All surveys and analysis show this to be the case. People are at their wits' end. That is why we desperately need to go down the route the Labour Party is advocating. This is part of a bigger jigsaw of ways in which we need to deal with this virus. The edges of all the other components of the jigsaw get worn and then the whole thing falls apart because this is the critical piece. If we fail to deal with the variants, all our other work will be undone because there are so many unknowns involved.

Some people have said that travel only accounts for a tiny number of infections. I have two issues with that. First, the British variant did not arrive here as a result of misfortune. It arrived here because people travelled here. This variant is more deadly than the original virus. It is far more infectious, spreads quicker and hits different cohorts of people that the first virus did not hit in the same way. Second, when people talk about variants and travel, they need to remember that people who travel are highly prone to infection and have the capacity to spread disease quickly. People are at their wits' end. Even though only a small percentage are travelling, it does not matter how small it is. It can magnify and once it does, we have a problem.

Our amendment seeks to remedy the glaring omission in this legislation. I wish to make a number of other points on the amendment and the legislation. Those points go hand in hand. I cannot understand why it has taken since May of last year to introduce any form of legislation relating to quarantine. To avoid the need to use freedom of information requests, parliamentary questions, etc., I ask the Minister to outline why the conversation stopped last May. Why has it taken until now to do this? What were the blockages? Where they at political level or civil servant level? Step by step, what happened from May until now?

We continually hear that NPHET advises and that the Government is following NPHET's advice. It certainly is not following NPHET here; it is going against public health advice. Surely public health advice is that we should keep all the variants out as much as possible and use all the tools at our disposal. The Government has gone against public health advice for the past nine months. What has happened? I welcome that the Minister has spoken to his counterpart in New Zealand in recent weeks. All the research on how we should be doing this as an island nation should have been done long before that. I wonder if, psychologically, there is some issue at the heart of Government that has opposed this for a longer period. I personally think there is.

I was taken by the Tánaiste's comments on multiple programmes yesterday, where he said that we need a differentiated approach because the Isle of Man and Iceland do not have Covid. It was said to me a number of times yesterday that that was a ridiculous example. This is not about a differentiated approach. This is about maximising and ensuring that our people are protected. A differentiated approach may be laudable in different circumstances but we are in the heart of the pandemic and at a very critical juncture. This is not the time for a differentiated approach.

25 February 2021

When people come into this country from countries with high Covid rates and are asked to quarantine legally for 14 days, why are they not PCR tested after quarantine, in the middle of it or when they arrive? I asked the Minister about this yesterday so I would appreciate if he could formulate a reply. It seemed from his reaction yesterday that he thought it was possibly worthy of consideration.

**Minister for Health(Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I thank him for verifying that. If the Oireachtas decides to go down the Government's route, which I oppose and I hope it does not do so, I urge the Government to implement that testing as part of it. That would give at least some form of confidence to people, even if it is a weakened confidence.

Human nature means that a significant percentage of people will not unilaterally and absolutely adhere to a self-imposed quarantine. We all saw that with the people coming back into the country at Christmas. There is no way they adhered to a quarantine, as it would not have been worth their while coming home if they did. Can we deal with that?

How are the measures being proposed going to be implemented? The general secretary of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, Antoinette Cunningham, said she had absolutely no idea about gardaí policing mandatory quarantine, whether at home or in hotels, as is proposed in this legislation. How is that possible? I have spoken to many members of An Garda Síochána. Many Members here have friends in An Garda Síochána, such as people we went to school with or grew up with, neighbours or family members in some cases. I have not met one garda yet or heard one story of An Garda Síochána being asked to call to somebody's home to check if they were quarantining. Not one. Zero. None. If anybody in this House has heard of that happening, I ask them to tell us because it would be news to me and many others.

As for the infrastructure around this, what has been done in the time preceding the introduction of this legislation as regards hotels, transport and the health requirements of those who will be quarantining in hotels? Deputy Berry spoke about the use of the Army. How far down the line is the Government on all these issues, considering the amount of time that has passed and that nothing has been done?

There is one other glaring issue in what the Government is proposing versus what we in the Labour Party, together with some other Opposition parties and Independents, are proposing. The UK has a list of 33 countries for which people have to quarantine. Why is the Government only proposing 20? Why is there a differential between the two islands? The UK's list has 33 countries versus 20 in what the Government has proposed. It seems illogical to me, given that we have been talking about an all-island or two-island approach.

This amendment is a critical one for us. It is one of the most important votes we as a House are going to have during this pandemic. There are some members of Government who, dare I say it, reluctantly believe that the limited, half-baked mandatory hotel quarantine system it is putting forward will work, nine months after it was asked for in the public health advice. The Government says it always follows public health advice but it failed to do so in this case. There are also those of us who believe the Irish people deserve respect, to be given every chance and an opportunity to get out of being locked into operating within 5 km of their homes in the coming months. The Irish people deserve the best chance against the biggest threats and anybody would acknowledge that the biggest threat at this moment is the variants that are coming down

the road. If the Minister goes down this route he will not be giving the Irish people the best chance. I do not want to be standing up here again in the future reminding him that he has failed the Irish people. There is an equation in the decision that has to be made today. Will the Government put the Irish people first or will it put a failed strategy first? Our proposal protects the Irish people as much as possible, whereas the Government's is a failed strategy. I will be asking everybody in this House to support the Labour Party amendment, on which we intend to call a vote later today.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I support the Labour Party amendment, as well as amendment No. 31, which is in the name of two Sinn Féin Deputies. A number of these amendments are grouped. We had lengthy discussions on Second Stage, in which we set out our overall view of the Bill and the Government's failure in this area. At the heart of that failure is the matter being addressed by the amendments tabled by various Opposition groupings. The reason there is unity among the Opposition on this is that it makes sense. It is simply common sense that we would put in place mandatory hotel quarantine for all non-essential travel, irrespective of where somebody is coming from. For the vast majority of people, that makes sense and opinion polls show it is supported by over 90% of the people in this State. It seems that everybody accepts this is a good idea, except for the Cabinet, the Government and the Minister for Health.

Nine months ago, NPHET argued with the Government and recommended that it remove all discretionary elements of the travel checks. The Government refused to listen to it. Members of the Opposition went on numerous television and radio programmes and argued with the Minister, his colleagues in government and backbench Deputies about the Government's disastrous policy on checks and controls at airports. Every time the proposal for quarantine was raised in this House by Opposition Deputies, it was knocked back by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Ministers for Transport and for Health or others. They said it was simply not necessary and not possible. Here we are, nine months later, and all of a sudden mandatory hotel quarantine is possible. However, it is only possible for people coming from some countries and not people coming from all countries. While one could argue that a half measure is better than no measure, in reality that is not the case because of the new variants and strains of this virus, which are highly contagious and dangerous.

*2 o'clock*

The refusal of the Government to listen to the public health advice nine months ago, and since then, has led us to a situation where the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, has had to scramble to put in place legislation at the eleventh hour. The Minister still has not worked out all of the details of how this is going to work and he has not given us a date for when this Bill, if enacted, will come into effect. We are not in a position to give any of that information to the public; nor is the Minister because if he could he would be communicating it to us. The Minister, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the leader of the Green Party when pressed on this issue today, have not been able to give us a satisfactory or reasonable answer as to why mandatory quarantine cannot be put in place for all non-essential travellers irrespective of what country they come from.

We have heard from the Tánaiste that one of the reasons may be because Iceland, the Isle of Man and other countries have low levels of the variant and so we should not seek to stop people from those countries coming here. One can only imagine what that does to somebody who, at this point in time, is at home, working from home, as he or she has been doing for months now, the person who has lost his or her job and is at home, staying indoors other than to grocery shop or to avail of an essential service and the parents of children who have been home-schooled for

the past number of months. It is important to bear in mind that people having been living with some of form of restrictions for months. One can only imagine how people feel on hearing that people from Iceland and the Isle of Man can travel into Ireland while they cannot leave their homes unless for essential purposes or to take exercise, but only within 5 km of their home. Yet, travel is still permitted. The fact the Government does not get that anger and frustration and the logic of that, or the illogic of its position as people see it, is infuriating.

Essentially, the Minister is saying to Members of this House that he is putting in place a two-tier quarantine system. There will be mandatory hotel quarantine for people coming from some countries such that we will have some level of protection. I imagine the reason for that is to stop the importation of any of the new variants or the virus itself. We are imposing quarantine in respect of travel from some countries but for other countries we are going to continue with the nod and wink home quarantine, which is no quarantine at all. It is quarantine in name only.

We heard yesterday from the general secretary of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, that there was no consultation with that organisation in relation to the role it will play in policing this legislation. She said they had been given no operational instructions and no guidelines. The Government is telling us that this will be enforced and this can work, yet the organisation that will be tasked with enforcing it has not been consulted or given any instructions. How in God's name is anybody meant to have confidence in that process? It is beyond breathtaking that the Government continues with that nonsense. This cannot be enforced. Home quarantine will not be enforced. It cannot be enforced.

Like Deputy Kelly, I am putting the Minister on notice - it is important for the Opposition to put the Government on notice - that if he does not accept these amendments and go the full distance, as he should do to ensure we have the most robust quarantine and testing regime in place for international travel, and new variants of the virus enter Ireland from any of those countries not on the list, Government will have to take full responsibility for it. The failure to act is solely that of the Government. It does not lie with NPHEA or with anybody in opposition or the Irish people who are doing their best and are at their wits end. As accepted by the Taoiseach in the speech he gave a few days ago, people are frustrated and fed up. Of course, they are. They are fed up with the restrictions, but they are also fed up with the Government's half measures. They are also fed up with the fact that it is one rule for them in that they cannot leave or go 5 km outside of their homes, but people can come here by airplane from most countries in the world and are not subject to quarantine. It is driving people bonkers and rightly so. That anger and frustration will, in my view, continue to grow and it will reach a very high level if over the next number of weeks and months we see continued importation of any strain of this virus into this State, when people are doing their best to keep the numbers low.

We have had several conversations in this Chamber about the impact of Covid-19 on front-line hospitals. When the virus gets out of control, our hospitals fill up, ICUs fill up and, unfortunately, more people die. We have seen record numbers of people die in January and February this year. The Minister and I, and others in this Chamber, will mourn every one of those people who have passed away. The only way we can prevent this happening in the future is by ensuring the system that should be in place is in place, that the processes that should be in place are in place and that the solutions that should be in place are in place. One of those solutions must be mandatory hotel quarantine and testing. There still is no legal requirement for a mandatory PCR test for a person travelling into this state.

I am conscious that there is a lengthy list of Deputies waiting to come in. One of our amendments has been ruled out of order, which is a matter for the Ceann Comhairle. Decisions are made to rule amendments out of order for all sorts of reasons. However, one of the amendments we tabled provides that the Minister would engage with his colleague in the North in regard to data sharing. It was ruled out of order on the basis that it would incur a cost on the Exchequer. This is how laughable all of this is becoming. It is really serious. The Minister is still not dealing with the issues. He is not engaging and sharing data with his colleague in the North, going the full distance on travel or seeking to get all of the other elements of this right. Why is he surprised that people are angry and frustrated? There is no point in Government putting it back on the Opposition and claiming, as it has done, that some parties or the Opposition are playing politics. The only people playing politics as far as I can see are Ministers, who are trying to pin the blame on everybody else but themselves.

The Minister needs to step up to the plate on this issue. I appeal to him, even at this eleventh hour, to support these amendments. If he does not and there is continued importation of the virus into this state as a consequence of his half baked solutions as presented today, be that on his head and that of Government, not the Irish public who are abiding by the restrictions or the Opposition which is pleading with Government to do what is right. It will be the sole responsibility of the Minister and the Government.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Bríd Smith, followed by Deputy Mattie McGrath.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I have just finished a phone call with a constituent in Ballyfermot. I am not sure if the Minister is aware of the following, but it will be interesting to hear if he is. At least 90 people over 85 years of age have had their vaccination appointments for today and tomorrow cancelled. The Ballyfermot primary healthcare centre was emptied of all other appointments to allow that to happen. The vaccines never arrived, leaving these people very disappointed, worried and anxious and an entire community up in arms about how they have been treated. They cannot make contact by phone with anyone from the centre or the HSE to seek an explanation or to offer an alternative date. That is a flavour of the background to the frustration, sense of desperation and growing anger out there over the way this Government is handling the Covid crisis. What the Minister is seeking to do here today in terms of the legislation before us, will do nothing but compound that.

A whole community was let down this morning when the vaccines were not delivered to Ballyfermot. We are not talking about Timbuktu; Ballyfermot is in Dublin 10 and it is easy to find. People were told they would be getting the vaccine and their appointments were scheduled. Instead, they are still in a situation where none of them can go more than 5 km beyond their home town and they must stick to the same rigid regime. Everybody is complying with the regime and everybody wants the over-85s in Ballyfermot to get their jabs because they are salt of the earth people who made the communities that we all love. Everybody is hopeful in that regard. Then the Minister comes in here and tells us he is going ahead with legislation that will see foreign travel into this country continue unabated and unchecked for at least another four weeks. Even after the regulations become applicable, or possibly applicable, they will cover only a tiny cohort of potential travellers into the country. The bulk of travel into Ireland is not coming from the suggested list; it is coming from all over Europe and the USA. It includes the American troops who have not quarantined and are coming through Shannon and travelling into Limerick.

There are many examples of where there is real danger of variants of the virus coming into

the State. Meanwhile, people in this country struggle to put up with the restrictions, do their best for each other and maintain their sense of social solidarity. They need to see social solidarity from the Government. They need the Government to think about what it is actually doing rather than the optics of what it is doing. The Government is failing to help to crush the virus while everybody else is bending over backwards in their efforts to do so. The Minister has it within his power to accept the amendments that are before him today. I plead with him to do so and to give people a sense of hope and an idea that we can do this. If we do not limit non-essential travel into the country and enforce quarantines, then we are a leaky sieve and we are potentially wide open to variants, whether from California, Austria or God knows where else.

The measures the Minister is proposing to introduce will not do what they are meant to do. He is either not thinking things through or else he, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party are only concerned with the optics. After failing for ten months to take note of what needs to be done and trying to do it, they are now pretending they are doing something. Never let it be said that the Government tried to introduce mandatory quarantine, because that is not the case. It is making a bags of things and leaving our communities very vulnerable and wide open. I would appreciate an explanation for what happened in my constituency this morning because it is probably not the only constituency in the country in which it is happening. We need to know how people who were desperate to be vaccinated and who have been let down are going to be treated while they wait for an appointment. I ask the Minister to accept these amendments because they will do the job, unlike the provisions he has devised.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** For the information of Members, I have selected the order of speakers on the basis of when they indicated. The next speaker is Deputy Mattie McGrath.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Can the Ceann Comhairle give us the list?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The list in front of me has the following speakers in the order they indicated: Deputies Mattie McGrath, Boyd Barrett, Ó Murchú, Duncan Smith, Paul Murphy, Shortall, Barry, Michael Collins and McNamara. Deputy O'Rourke is also indicating.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I understood that Deputies would be called in the order of the amendments they have submitted under this grouping.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is one way of selecting the order of speakers.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Is that not the convention?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am not aware of that convention but it may have been followed in the past. I have simply selected Members in the order in which they indicated. I call Deputy Mattie McGrath.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I too rise to support the Labour Party amendment and the associated amendments in this grouping. We in the Rural Independent Group have tabled a number of amendments and I thank Brian Ó Domhnaill in our office for assisting us in producing them. They are quite detailed and also quite rushed because we did not have a lot of time. There is not enough time allocated to discuss this Bill. By the looks of things, we will not reach many of the amendments. We are only on an chéad cheann and if we are still discussing this group at 4.30 p.m., we will not even get a vote on it. We have to be cognisant of that.

Another speaker said that this legislation is a case of closing the door when the horse has

bolted. As I said this morning, the horse is already in Cheltenham or a lot further away. Deputy Kelly and other party and group leaders will be aware that ever since the start of the pandemic, or at least when we used to have weekly or fortnightly briefings - we have not had such a briefing from the Taoiseach, NPHET or anybody else since last November although they talk about collaboration and keeping people informed - I always wanted quarantine at the airports and restrictions on travel. This is not because I am a killjoy who does not want people travelling and who wants to lock them up and throw away the keys. That is not at all what I want. The Irish people have made heroic efforts during this crisis. I sympathise, in particular, with anyone who has lost a loved one and could not have a proper funeral or attend the funeral. I salute everybody involved in trying to beat the virus.

I have said before that this is like drawing water and I remember as a buachaill óg drawing water from a well with a bucket. If there were holes in the bucket, one would never fill one's churn. It is as simple as that. We were shocked to hear the figures for the numbers of people coming into and out of the country. I did not in my wildest dreams think there were those kinds of numbers coming in but they are coming in and have been coming in. Of course, we wanted to be the poster boys of Europe. Every answer I got from the previous Taoiseach and the current Taoiseach was that we are European and we are in this together with Europe. However, Poland and Hungary sealed their borders, as did other places within Europe, with varying degrees of success. We could not do that because we are the good boys, the white-haired boys in Europe, and we wanted to be the best Europeans. We were best in the class at one stage, we were told, then we went to worst in the class and I do not know where we are now or whether we are in the class at all.

We certainly are not getting a fair crack of the whip when it comes to getting vaccines from Europe. When one looks across the pond at our nearest neighbours, it is staggering to see that they have administered 12.6 million vaccines, which they acquired from outside the EU. We are patting ourselves on the back that we have 350,000 or so people vaccinated. I am tired of asking the Minister about the flu vaccination programme that was rolled out late last summer, because he will not answer my question. I asked him in November, three weeks ago and again this morning to tell me whether I am being given misinformation in this regard from good sources. I do not believe I am misinformed that only 1.4 million of the 2 million vaccines can be accounted for. In that context, how will the HSE, the Department of Health or whoever else be able to roll out 10 million vaccines, which is the figure we were given this morning? There is not a hope in hell of it. They are like children playing with a jigsaw. If they could not make the jigsaw with 2 million pieces, how will they make it with 10 million pieces?

I know of some horrific cases where people were all buoyed up to get their vaccines but did not receive them. I was talking to one such man in Tipperary last Monday week who was due to get the vaccine on the Wednesday. I am talking about people who are aged over 85 and were due to get the vaccine in doctors' centres in Cahir, Carrick-on-Suir and other places. Thanks be to God, one doctor's surgery in Cahir got the vaccines and all its patients got their vaccines. However, another doctor in the town got none of the 116 injections that were supposed to arrive. Logistics can go wrong with anyone but there has been no information given in the eight days since as to where the vaccines went, where they are now, why they did not arrive and when they will arrive. It is awful. A wonderful woman in her 101st year, who was a business person all her life and is still a sprightly woman, was one of the people going in for the vaccine who was turned away. Another very sick couple in that age group - I will not mention names - are absolutely desperate. These people had the anticipation, expectation and delight of going for

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the vaccine and then they did not get it. Now we cannot get information to tell them they will get it next Wednesday or whenever. What is the cause of the dysfunction in this process? The same thing happened at a doctor's practice in Carrick-on-Suir. Most doctors got their vaccines but one practice in south Tipperary and another in south Kilkenny did not get them. People were let down. Why is the process so dysfunctional?

As I said, I was not happy with the way the flu vaccine was administered. I am told it has been the case for years that accountability is negligible. How are people supposed to have the hope that we so badly need on this beautiful spring day that we look out and see around us? How will we get the people to follow us? Ní neart go cur le chéile is my belief i gcónaí, but the Government has made a hames of things. I said again this morning that the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health have dropped the ball spectacularly since they took the baton. They were mad to get into government. At least there was a degree of co-ordination and some type of system in place under the previous Taoiseach and Minister for Health. We, as Opposition groups, were always kept informed. Now we are shut out. The Government knows best and we know nothing. The Taoiseach and the Minister do not want our advice. They want us to come in here as cannon fodder and vote for this Bill. I have major issues with voting for this legislation because it is inadequate, inept and ten months too late. Is it workable? The Minister for Health tells us all that gardaí are doing checks on homes and everything else. The Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, was challenged again today about that. Gardaí are frustrated too. They are getting reams of documentation at the levels of inspector, superintendent and sergeant in charge. I salute the gardaí on the ground who are trying to do their jobs. They are frustrated. They have families too. They have not been given the vaccine and they are far down the list. They have to deal with all kinds of situations in any 12-hour stint.

There is utter confusion. I can only hope and believe that the vaccine will do what it is meant to do and people will not get Covid-19 but that is not the assurance I got from Tony Holohan or the Taoiseach. I am simply saying this outfit, the HSE, is not fit for purpose. Two former Taoisigh, Mr. Ahern and Mr. Cowen, told me in the House privately that they were going to disband the HSE. We all know it is not fit for purpose. We see the problems in my constituency and in Limerick, one of the worst places for beds and trolleys, this week. We see the problems with the mental health services. I had a woman on to me recently about a man looking for a private mental health therapy consultation. He had to wait 12 months when he went private. Someone said an epidemic was going to start, but it is here and we are in the middle of it. People are locked away and cannot grieve or support each other. They cannot visit houses and cannot go anywhere.

We see this tomfoolery at the airports - that is what I call it. People can waltz in, waltz out and boast about it. They might fill in a form sometimes and then they might get a call or they might not. We were told the whole tracing system crashed after Christmas because of the pressure. There is no intent to seal people coming from abroad, but there must be. There are huge pitfalls within the legislation and I believe it could be open to legal challenge.

The Minister has not given us any timeline. I know we are debating the matter today and it is being guillotined. That is a shame because it means many of the amendments that our group and other groups put down will not be reached. There is no timeline for implementation, which is something I would like to see. I know it is in the Seanad on Monday but when will it be signed into law? When will we make the preparations to enact it? We have no date. It will simply be sent up to the park to be signed like other legislation that has been passed but not implemented. How will we know what its various aspects are? Have the hotels been procured?

Do they have security staff? Nothing like that is detailed. It is being done on a wing and a prayer. It is a wish list and merely a hope that people will be good. They have been very good but good only carries us so far and they are fatigued now, as are the nursing staff. It is striking to think that we gave student nurses a round of applause in the Chamber rather than pay them a meagre amount.

I have a question relating to the vaccination. Why is it so much more expensive to have it carried out here than across the water? If I am right, the fee for two vaccinations in Britain is £14 but it is €60 here for one. That is what I am told. Why is this? Is this rip-off Ireland? Why is it so expensive? Why can we not run the vaccines out in community halls using retired nurses and other professionals who signed up in their thousands for Ireland's call? Only 300 or so were engaged. They are available and we have them. Is it the preserve of certain people?

I have no faith in the vaccination figures the Taoiseach gave the other night for June. There is not a hope we will achieve those at the rate we are going, even if we had the vaccines. We cannot find a doctor's surgery in Cahir or in Dublin 10, as Deputy Smith said. There is no explanation. If I ring up, there is no one to give me an answer to when the vaccines will be available, where they are and whether they will come next. It is dysfunctional in the extreme. It is pathetic. I have serious issues about it. I am not in favour of this half-baked legislation.

We did the same here some time ago on the forestry Bill. I want to equate the two issues. I voted against that Bill because I said it was useless and it has proved to be useless. Many of my colleagues voted for it saying half a Bill was better than none. This is not even half a Bill. It is not co-ordinated, thought out or proper. Why is the Minister for Health dealing with it? I was told that he answered on "Claire Byrne Live" that he has it because he was given it. He is one of the good boys in the class. He will take his punishment and do his lessons. He was given it. Why is the Minister for Justice not dealing with these issues? The Minister for Justice could be asked about the Garda and whether gardaí had been briefed, schooled, educated and trained on this. They have enough to do without looking after quarantine in hotels and everything else. There are few of them there. I have major issues with the Bill.

I will not go on for much longer. I could go into all the different people who have been affected. Why can we have an election in a day? Everyone in the country can vote on a long day from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. In most places in the country, we can have two officials per booth and the votes can be counted within a couple of days. That is for 4 million people, although maybe only half of them vote. Anyway, we can do it in one day. It will be five years to roll out a vaccine by the looks of things. Surely we have the template. I compliment a certain businessman in Tipperary, William O'Halloran, who came to me with that idea yesterday morning. He asked how we can have an election in a day. We can do that with all our organisation and co-ordination. The process has stood the test of time well, aside from the fiasco with the voting machines. Yet, we are going to go on forever.

The people are sick, sore and tired of George Lee and Fergal Bowers. They should have their own channels. I said to the former Deputy, Mr. Lee, that he had found his vocation. It is to strike fear into every elderly person in the country. We should remember these people are at home and cannot leave. Many only have one channel. We need some light entertainment but the people who want to provide that are not allowed.

People cannot go to worship. This was one of the only countries in the world where, during level 3, people could not go to public worship. However, we see some religious people flooding

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into buildings and flooding out and there is no monitoring of it. The same applies with certain funerals. There were probably 500 people at a funeral yesterday in east Limerick. It is shocking. There were no masks or anything else.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy is wandering a little from the subject matter.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Yes, I am sorry but this is factual.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** He is dog-whistling as well.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am not dog-whistling. I am telling the truth that people are relaying to me. They are highly frustrated that they cannot go to services of any denomination and they see that other people can do what they like. That is the basic nutshell of it. The Government has not dealt with that and will not deal with it. This legislation cannot deal with it either because it is not foolproof or thought-through. Amendments will not be accepted because we will not get to them. Would they be accepted anyway? Some have been ruled out of order, as other have said.

I am not dog-whistling. I am relating the facts as they are. The people of Ireland have suffered enough, from the cradle to the grave. They are unable to have company when they are in maternity wards giving birth. They are unable to grieve at a funeral, whether it is a normal death or a Covid death. It is shocking that only ten people can go into a church even in the case of big families. It is shocking. People were well able to put their shoulder to the wheel, as they did last spring. They fought gallantly but they are fatigued and mixed messages are coming from Ministers.

The Minister is present. I remember the Iraq war. Comical Ali came on every night telling us that Saddam was winning the war, even though the bombs were falling around him. The Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, did the same on “Claire Byrne Live”. He is like Comical Ali - he is Comical Donnelly.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Does Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett have any views on this cluster of amendments? I am sure he has.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I have amendments in the group. We actually went to the trouble of putting in amendments. There are more than 20 of them. My thanks to the staff in the offices of People Before Profit and Rise who, at short notice, had to submit over 20 amendments. There are connected amendments across this grouping and other groupings.

The purpose of the amendments is to try to turn a Bill that is, in the form put forward by the Government, actually a public relations exercise on mandatory quarantine. It is not actually a serious attempt to establish mandatory quarantine for people travelling into the country. It is an attempt by the Government, which is under pressure from public anger over its failure to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and the dire surge we saw in recent months, to make it look as if it is doing something, while continuing with the same failed disastrous policy that has led to so many needless deaths. It has also led to our health services being overrun in the first couple of months. This is putting extraordinary pressure and stress on our healthcare workers. It has led to tragedy and bereavement for many families and many people getting sick as well. The Government had to respond to that, as did some of those in the Opposition who said not a word about the Government’s failed strategy when it was pursuing the policy in December. They have since become very wise after the event and are berating the Government for failing

to address this issue since last May when NPHET put the advice forward. Some of us actually supported NPHET way back then and put forward detailed policy documents calling for mandatory quarantine as part of an alternative strategy to eliminate Covid-19 and try to get our society back to some sort of normality, prevent needless deaths and protect our health services and workers. However, we were siren voices, ignored and dismissed for most of that time.

It has taken the tragic events which followed the Government's disastrous decisions over Christmas - and the silence of most of the Opposition while it was making them - to finally force this debate into the public domain. Even now, however, the Government just wants to pretend it is doing something about it. What Deputy Bríd Smith said about the situation in Ballyfermot and vaccines not arriving is interesting because I fear the pretence around mandatory quarantine in this legislation may be linked to a pretence about vaccine distribution as well. I happened to get a text just now from a woman in my area who lives in Blackrock but whose 88-year-old father lives in Donaghmede. He went down to the GP's clinic this morning looking for his vaccine. He and many other elderly people discovered the vaccines had not arrived there either. Therefore what Deputy Bríd Smith referred to in Ballyfermot is not just happening there but it appears, very alarmingly, to be happening in GP clinics in Donaghmede and God knows where else. Thus, we have announcements by the Government about mandatory quarantine and announcements about the vaccine but then the reality is very different and the consequences of that can, of course, be tragic.

I want to ask the Minister a specific question. There are a lot of elderly, vulnerable people who thought they were being vaccinated today and who have discovered that the vaccines have not arrived. Where are the vaccines? What is happening? There is clearly a pattern of GP clinics not getting vaccines for elderly people in a number of locations. God knows where else this may be happening today. Why is it happening and what is going to be done to ensure that those elderly and vulnerable citizens get the vaccine and do not have to wait for weeks in uncertainty, after what has already been a very traumatising, anxiety-filled period due to the huge surges of the past few months?

As already stated, our amendments cut across a number of groups but essentially seek to address the fact that the Government is not imposing actual mandatory quarantine. In fact, the exception to mandatory quarantine is the rule in the legislation. Our amendments seek to do the very opposite, such that every incoming traveller from every country will be subject to mandatory quarantine. This is because it makes no sense whatsoever to select, as the Government is doing, 20 countries. These are countries which very few people are travelling here from in any event, countries in Africa, Latin America and, for some reason, the state of Austria. It is bizarre, quite honestly. The largest number of travellers coming here are from countries where we know there are high levels of Covid cases and where the variants are present, namely, the United States, European countries and many other places. What the Government is doing is therefore madness; it makes no sense and just shows the Bill to be a sham and not an actual attempt to put in place mandatory quarantine. I am curious to know what the logic is. I think the Government do not want to upset certain economic interests. It may also be to do with the European Union's policies. I am not quite sure but suspect the former. Yesterday, Deputy Paul Murphy mentioned that there has been no word about the US troops going through Shannon Airport, not quarantining, waltzing around Shannon and so on. Despite this we want to impose mandatory quarantine on just a select few countries. US troops are fine, as are huge numbers of people from the UK, from the US where there are variants, and so on. It is clear, therefore, that this is not a serious attempt at action.

I am interested to hear about the Minister's conversation with the New Zealand authorities. If he were actually talking to people in New Zealand and to the public health authorities in Australia, he would understand how to impose a mandatory quarantine and link it to an effective strategy to drive Covid down to the point where, as is the case in those countries, people could be living normal lives. Clearly, the Minister, the Government and, I must say, some of the Opposition still do not quite understand this. Mandatory quarantine is not about quarantining those engaging in non-essential travel as some have said; it is about stopping non-essential travel and quarantining those who must engage in essential travel into the jurisdiction. People do not seem to understand even this elementary point. One cannot go to New Zealand for any reason other than an essential one. They just turn people around. They do not need to quarantine people or fine them, they just turn people away and do not allow them in. That is how the system works there. We do not need quarantine for non-essential travel into the country because there should be no such travel into the country, full stop. Anybody who arrives for non-essential reasons should simply be told to turn around and go back to where they came from. It is essential travel which should be subject to quarantine and the exceptional circumstances for that should be very narrowly defined. Preventing non-essential travel should be the rule whereas the Government is essentially making it the exception. The PCR test is similarly meaningless in terms of the non-designated countries. It will do absolutely nothing to prevent the importation of variants and the virus generally.

All of this must be linked to a serious public health strategy and the resourcing of our public health teams. Again, the Government's failure to do that is manifest in this legislation. We have tried to address it in our amendments. I heard the AGSI say that its members are not qualified to organise mandatory quarantine. It is absolutely correct in that regard. Does the Government think that it is the police who are organising mandatory quarantine in Australia or New Zealand? It is not. It is public health doctors together with staffed and resourced public health teams. That is who calls around to a person's house, rather than the police. How would the Garda know how to deal with mandatory quarantine or public health issues? It is ridiculous and the AGSI is absolutely right. People need to get into their heads how under-resourced and dysfunctional our health service is and how that is seriously disarming our ability to deal with Covid-19, be it in terms of a quarantine regime for travel or eliminating community transmission and having the public health infrastructure on the ground to actually deal with any outbreaks which may still arise.

People would be shocked if only they knew the contrast. The person from whom I learned about the set-up in Australia is an Irish public health doctor who worked briefly for Irish public health. He was educated and qualified here, worked briefly in the Irish public health system and left. He is now in charge of infection control in Queensland, Australia, where, by the way, there has not been a Covid outbreak to deal with since June. This is because they had one lockdown, eliminated community transmission and are now able to open up. They are living normal lives but if there is an outbreak, they have the infrastructure in place to deal with it. He was absolutely adamant that this could be done here. I asked him to explain the difference between the resources he has at his disposal - this is directly relevant to the legislation - and the situation in Ireland. He said they, as qualified public health people, had the resources and the authority to go the police, the local hospital or any state agency, simply state what they need and have it given to them. The legislation was in place beforehand and a plan was prepared before Covid ever broke out, as the WHO had requested of states. The Irish Government had committed to preparing such a plan but never followed through.

The first NPHEP briefing on Covid took place in late February 2020 and was attended by one representative of one Dáil office in the Houses of the Oireachtas - my office. Our staff member asked whether drills had been done, as the WHO had required. There was no answer to that question. The staff member was told an email would be sent to let us know. The drills had not been done. There was no preparation for this even though the WHO had been telling states they needed to prepare. That is the reality of what is going on.

I asked the public health doctor in Australia what the difference would be between his public health team in Australia and the public health situation he would have faced if he were working in Dún Laoghaire. He said that he has 16 staff under him, all of whom are directly employed public health professionals. Of course, he has consultant status. He said he can ring up the equivalent of Tony Holohan or NPHEP, describe the situation and tell them what he needs. That does not happen here. He said that public health doctors in Ireland cannot make direct contact in that way. I asked how many staff he would have if he were employed here. He said he would not have any staff. He has 16 staff over there and he can go to the local hospital if he needs more. He can tell the police and the local authority what to do because, as it is a public health emergency, the public health professionals decide how it is responded to. The resources are made available and the legislation is already in place. That is how one deals with a pandemic. What we have is a disaster in comparison and the consequences of that have been dire. That is the truth of it. I would be interested to hear the Minister's response on that issue.

The amendments I and my colleagues have tabled seek to make mandatory quarantine a reality and to remove the potential for profiteering from the establishment of the facilities necessary if we are to actually have a proper mandatory quarantine regime. Our amendments on that front have been ruled out of order but I wish to point out that they are not out of order because they are directly connected to the public health effort. In Australia, any profit motivation has been removed from the public health and quarantine system established there because the authorities there found that where profit came into play, it was undermining the public health effort because staff were moving from one place to another, there were staff shortages and corners were being cut and so on. Our amendments seek to ensure that people will be employed directly by the health agencies and the public bodies necessary for the effort and that they will all be under the authority of public health. That is what is necessary in order to deal with this pandemic. Sadly, I do not think the Government will do that. This legislation is certainly not even a serious effort to do. Nonetheless, we will continue our campaign for a proper response to the Covid pandemic.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I remind Deputies that we are on section 2 of the Bill and we are dealing with a grouping of several amendments. There are ten speakers offering as things stand, so I appeal to Members to be conscious of time.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I will not take very long on this issue. Members are aware of the distress that people are experiencing. It has been recognised many times in the House, particularly today. Members are aware that people are worried and disgruntled and wish to see a plan and a way through this. They do not believe a sufficient amount is being done with regard to the particular issue of hotel quarantining.

Sinn Féin welcomes the fact that the Government has got to the point of discussing quarantining people coming in from 20 countries. All present know the current difficulties. We know of the Californian, Brazilian and South African strains, but we do not know from where the next strain will come or where the real difficulty may be. What we need to do is to ensure the

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ultimate protection we can give our people is in place and that means quarantining across the board in respect of flights into Ireland. I accept that those who are involved in freight and supply chains are an absolutely necessary part of the workforce to ensure we maintain an element of connectivity. We cannot do absolutely everything we need to do, but we can do a hell of a lot more and we need to ensure it is done as soon as possible.

Many Deputies have recently expressed concerns in the House regarding problems that are obviously very distressing, particularly for some older citizens, such as people showing up to be vaccinated but the vaccines not being available. We need those problems to be dealt with as quickly as possible.

An issue that frightens me is that it is expected that 100,000 vaccines will be delivered this week, while in April, May and June there could be at least 250,000 vaccines a week. We need to ensure that we have the infrastructure and capacity to deliver that. We need not only to deal with these individual issues but also to ensure that the system is absolutely streamlined.

Deputy Cullinane addressed the issue of the Sinn Féin amendment that has been ruled out of order but I am not particularly worried about the amendment. What I am worried about is delivery with regard to the sharing of information North and South on people travelling into this country from the point of view of ensuring that we do what we can in the context of mandatory quarantine. We cannot do everything, but we can do a lot more. It is as simple as that. We need to fireproof people from the vaccine as much as possible. That is the whole idea of hotel quarantining.

We need to be ahead of the game rather than waiting until we identify five, six, seven, eight, nine or ten cases of a new strain which may be worse than any of the strains we have seen before. We need to protect people and the vaccination programme and we need to deal with the issues. Sinn Féin calls on the Government to change its tack with regard to supporting these amendments or dealing with the reality that we need hotel quarantine for travellers into Ireland from every other country. We need an all-Ireland response and, if that cannot be delivered, we need a two-island response. It is as simple as that.

Progress reported; Committee to sit again.

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

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh - Ireland's progress in implementing the sustainable development goals across Departments; (2) Deputy Chris Andrews - continued Covid restrictions on outdoor sports such as golf and athletics; (3) Deputy Willie O'Dea - proposals to increase the wage subsidy scheme rate in line with increases in the minimum wage over the past decade; (4) Deputy Alan Farrell - the need for greater supports for the Irish aviation industry; (5) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - ministerial consent for the construction of the Arklow wastewater treatment plant; (6) Deputies Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and Gary Gannon - accreditation for the national training programme for special needs assistants; (7) Deputies Fergus O'Dowd and Kieran O'Donnell - the need for vaccination centres in Drogheda and Limerick; (8) Deputy

James Lawless - the availability and roll-out schedule for broadband in rural County Kildare; (9) Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan - what plans are in place to make rapid antigen testing available in non-clinical settings to support the reopening of the economy; (10) Deputy Jennifer Mur-nane O’Connor - plans to streamline the process to refund medical card patients for incorrect phlebotomy charges; (11) Deputy Brian Stanley - improved access for children to psychological assessments, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy in counties Laois and Offaly; (12) Deputy Verona Murphy - the reason for the variation in HSE allowances for wigs and hairpieces depending on where a person lives in Ireland; (13) Deputy Patrick Costello - the plight of Filipino front-line nurses unable to get passports renewed at the Irish Embassy in London due to Covid-19 closures; (14) Deputy Pat Buckley - flooding in the east Cork area; (15) Deputy Michael McNamara - the disabled driver and passenger scheme; (16) Deputy Ciarán Cannon - establishing a training programme for gardaí to protect vulnerable road users and an online portal to submit video evidence of potential road traffic violations; (17) Deputy Catherine Connolly - chun an fhadhb leanúnach le soláthar uisce i dTír an Fhia, Ceantar na nOileán, áit ina bhfuil muintir na háite ag brath ar sholáthar tancaer fíoruisce, a phlé; (18) Deputy Thomas Gould - the continued closure of Southdoc Blackpool; (19) Deputy Sean Sherlock - flooding in Fermoy, County Cork on Wednesday, 24 February and humanitarian flood relief support; (20) Deputy Matt Carthy - current funding plans for the opening of the group home in Carrickmacross for people with physical and sensory disabilities; (21) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - the issue of crime in Dublin in the context of another shooting in Dublin last night; and (22) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Carol Nolan, Michael Collins, Richard O’Donoghue, Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy-Rae - the need to open places of worship to limited numbers of people, especially for Easter.

The matters raised by Deputies Marc Ó Cathasaigh, Jennifer Whitmore, Pádraig O’Sullivan and Brian Stanley have been selected for discussion.

## **Health (Amendment) Bill 2021: Committee Stage (Resumed) and Remaining Stages**

### SECTION 2

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

In page 5, to delete line 2 and substitute the following:

“ ‘designated state’—

(a) on the coming into operation of this Act, means any country, territory, region or other place outside the State other than Northern Ireland,

(b) if at any time after passing a resolution under *section 9(5) of the Health (Amendment) Act 2021* both Houses of the Oireachtas so resolve, has the meaning assigned to it by section 38E(1);”.

-(Deputy Alan Kelly).

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Deputy Alan Kelly spoke at length in opening this debate, so I will not speak for too long. There are a couple of elements I wish to add. An issue I raised on

Second Stage relates to seasonal workers. I would like to hear a response from the Minister on this issue. What is the plan for seasonal workers? Last year, they were deemed essential workers. It was the subject of significant debate in terms of their treatment. There is a wider debate and wider issue in terms of their low pay, treatment, exploitation as a group of workers. That remains, unfortunately. However, from a public health point of view, will seasonal workers coming in to work in the agricultural industry in particular be subject to mandatory hotel quarantining? They should be and I and my colleagues hope that they will be, but we need clarification in that regard. Beyond that, another crucial point is whether engagement has taken place with the agricultural industry and the employers regarding the conditions under which these workers will work and, indeed, live. The conditions in which an awful lot of these workers live were highlighted last spring and summer, in the early part of this pandemic, to people beyond those who knew about it already. Three, four or five adults may be sharing a room, sink and toilet. Those are poor conditions and not conducive to living in a pandemic such as this. Have any changes been made in that regard? I hope so, because there has been no shortage of debate on the issue and concern was raised early in the pandemic. There is no excuse for progress not to have been made.

There are a number of different elements to the issue, including the designation of these seasonal workers as essential workers. Will they be subject to mandatory hotel quarantine? I am coming from a point of concern and care about the health of those workers and I want to make that abundantly clear. My concern is that there are loopholes in the existing legislation and the regulations that exist now, as a result of which workers may be being brought into this country right now and working and living in conditions that will damage their health if any of the strains of the virus get into their accommodation, as has happened previously. We saw it with the meat plant workers. There are also growers. Many other parts of the agricultural industry have used workers such as these over the years. This important point needs clarification.

I reflected on the Second Stage debate. Other contributors to the debate have spoken to the fact that this legislation does not seem to be connected to other elements of the public health response. That may sound unfair but it is how I and many others feel. On the suppression strategy within the community, the levels of community transmission remain high. We still are not getting the detail we need as to why that is the case. Where are the outbreaks taking place? How is the virus transmitting within the community? I think compliance generally remains very good but with numbers remaining high and no detail coming from Government on the issue, rumour mills and the blame game start. Young people are blamed for meeting in parks and this, that and all the rest are blamed when probably none of them are the cause of high transmission levels. We need to know. We have no suppression strategy based on a testing and tracing regime that will be rigorous enough to get infection numbers down to low double digits or single figures and keep them there. This mandatory hotel quarantining legislation seems to have been brought in tangentially to all the other measures. It is peculiar because one would think even at this stage, when the legislation is not going to be operational for another few weeks, that we would at least have details about which hotels will be used, which companies will be used for security and food, and all the operational aspects of the strategy. Those details are not there either. Our concern is whether this is going to happen at all.

St. Patrick's Day is coming up. We know that the country is shut down but 10,000 people came into the country through Dublin Airport this time last year. Is the Government aware of how many people are due to come into the country on St. Patrick's weekend? Those people may have booked a year or 18 months ago and are still going to come. Perhaps nobody will

come and everyone has cancelled but perhaps they have not. Is there a reason that these measures are being delayed to such an extent? It is absolutely incredible that there was no draft legislation prepared on this issue in 2020. Even Opposition parties and groups with small numbers of Members and resources that are nothing compared to the resources of Government Departments have legislation on various matters. It is on the shelf and ready to go. To think that there was no draft legislation on this issue beggars belief. It is now the last week of February, three weeks before St. Patrick's Day, and we are told that this legislation will not be operational for a couple of weeks.

We hope the vaccine roll-out improves and goes well. The evenings are brighter. We hope the numbers of infection go down but that is all hit-and-hope stuff, rather than any kind of tangible strategy we can look at and in which we can believe. Elements of this Government may believe they will not have to bring in these measures. That is why I feel that an element of this exercise is quite surreal. This debate should be much more energised and feel much more important but for the second session in a row, the Minister is cutting a lonely figure on the Government side of the House. The energy, interest and desire for this legislation to be as workable and strong as possible are coming from this side of the House. That is a concern.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** We should be clear that if these amendments from various parties are not passed, and the Government has clearly stated its objections to them, then this is not a Bill for mandatory hotel quarantine, as is being reported. It is a Bill for a piece of theatre or a joke about mandatory hotel quarantine. It is a Bill to close one window in a house when the other windows and the front and back doors are open. It is a Bill to try to make the Government look good and as if it is responding to the call by 90% of people for mandatory hotel quarantine while it is actually doing something that is extremely ineffective.

We know the Government, at least initially, intends to operate on the basis of a list of 20 countries. That is a tiny percentage of countries and it is not what we need. It is not what the National Public Health Emergency Team, Rise and People Before Profit have been calling for and it is not what 90% of people support.

I will go further than that. I encourage other Members of the Opposition to read section 38E of the Bill, which is not even a step in the direction we need to be travelling. I listened to the Minister's wrap-up on Second Stage. He told Deputies not to vote against the Bill on the basis that they do not agree with the list of 20 states. He said that was a matter for a statutory instrument and the Government could add all the countries it wanted. It is true that the 20 states are not listed in this Bill. It is also true that they will be listed through a statutory instrument. However, this Bill cannot be used to do what is necessary. It cannot be used to put every state on the list, as is proposed by all of our amendments. If they are not accepted, this Bill cannot be used to have mandatory hotel quarantine for all incoming travellers. The Bill sets it up that each state must be added explicitly on a country-by-country basis. Section 38E(4) provides that the Minister shall, on a regular basis, review the situation as it relates to each state. It explicitly starts from the position that no states are on the list and we add them on a state-by-state basis. This Bill will not allow us to do what we need.

If the Government votes down our amendments, as it has stated it will, I do not believe the Opposition should go along with this piece of theatre. We should oppose it and demand that the Government come back with proper mandatory hotel quarantine, which would start from the opposite position, structurally, from the one the Government is taking. Many of the Opposition amendments come from the proposition that every country is on the list to start with. Green

zones would then develop in Ireland and elsewhere, would be connected to each other and states could then be taken off the list as the position becomes clear and we develop green corridors. That cannot be done with the unamended version of the Bill.

What would proper mandatory hotel quarantine that would have an impact look like? It would be operated on a public, not-for-profit basis. It is incredible to think of the big contracts that will flow from this legislation. It is unfortunate that we will not get to the amendments which try to prevent that scenario. A proper hotel quarantine system would also include oversight of the implementation of the process, which is vital for public health and, therefore, a necessary restriction of civil liberties. There would be oversight from human rights groups, civil liberties groups and trade unionists to make sure that any powers are not abused. Without those elements, it is clear that this legislation is to be used by the Government to play at mandatory hotel quarantine and pretend it is doing it, while the Californian variant can come in as it wishes. The British variant is already rampant but if there is a new variant in Bristol, or wherever else, it can come in. Travellers can come from any other powerful county in the world without mandatory hotel quarantine.

*3 o'clock*

This Bill is very far from fit for purpose. It does not achieve what we need it to achieve and if the Government does not accept the amendments, I urge the other Opposition parties to join us on Fifth Stage to vote against the Bill and ask the Government to come back with a proposal for proper, mandatory hotel quarantine.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I rise to speak to this group of amendments and, in particular, amendments Nos. 33, 36 and 38 in my name, on behalf of the Social Democrats. All Opposition parties are represented in the context of this group of amendments because we are very much on the same page and have the same opinion on what needs to be done in order to increase our firepower in responding to Covid. It is quite clear that the Government is not serious about this matter at all. It is going through the motions. Yesterday, I referred to what is happening as a box-ticking exercise. The Bill will not achieve what we need to achieve in terms of controlling the importation of the virus. It will simply not do that. It is not even a half measure.

From the very beginning, the Government's record on travel has been abysmal. I have often referred to it as the single biggest failing of the Government response to Covid. Sometimes people ask about the scandal involving all of the deaths in the nursing homes, the fact that young people have been out of school for so long or all of the mental health problems. Yes, those are all really serious but the point is that last summer we had an opportunity to change the course of where the country was going when we got the daily figures down to four. At that stage, if the Government had controlled travel, this would be a very different country and we would not have the recent scandalous history we have had. It is so blindingly obvious that in a pandemic, as well as all the internal measures that need to be put in place, one has to stop the importation of the virus. That was blindingly obvious last year when we thought there was just the one type of virus, but it is all the more important at this stage with the various variants because we simply do not know what way the virus will behave. There are so many unknowns about this into the future. That is why it is essential that measures are put in place to stop us importing the virus. It is so blindingly obvious that we must ask why the Government did not take steps to address this. Why did the previous Government not do it either?

I wonder from where the pressure on the Government is coming. What kind of lobbying

has there been? At various stages when the Government announced a new approach or new measures to combat the virus, it did not speak to the Opposition parties. It spoke to the business lobbies and cleared it with them that it was okay. It seems that they are its masters. There are many questions about why we did not do this. There was a lot of opposition to interfering with international business travel, for example, but that could have been dealt with. There was also much concern about the aviation industry, and rightly so. Those of us on the north side of Dublin are only too conscious of the damage that has been done to the aviation industry. Regrettably, that was happening anyway because of the fact that the world is dealing with a pandemic and there was no substantial demand for aviation and international travel. Of course, the Government should have moved at an early stage and moved in a much more determined way to support aviation, Aer Lingus and the many workers associated with aviation in this country and provided the necessary supports so that the industry could survive. Unfortunately, those supports are inadequate. We have not done enough.

It showed a very warped, strange way of thinking when, a couple of weeks ago, I raised the need for quarantining and the Taoiseach accused me and my party of being hypocritical because we were looking for supports for the aviation sector. They are two sides of the same coin. Given the damage that has been done to aviation by the pandemic, the Government should have been supporting it and ensuring that there would be a future for aviation when we get through the pandemic. Pretending somehow that aviation will survive in a pandemic is just dishonest. That is what is hypocritical. It is logical, on the one hand, to look for controls to prevent the importation of the virus and also to seek proper supports for aviation, on the other. The two go hand in hand. That is why many of us have been talking about that for so long.

To return to why the Government is not taking action in a way that it is obvious it should be doing, one again has to ask what other pressures it has come under. Questions have been asked by Deputy Bríd Smith about seasonal workers, for example. Low-paid workers have been coming in from Brazil and eastern Europe in large numbers. Be they seasonal or not, many industries are dependent on that business model. Large numbers of pretty vulnerable people are coming here from other places in the world very often to work in poor conditions for low pay and little security. Is the concern that there is a threat to that business model? We know the meat industry is dependent on large numbers of low-paid workers. We know about the outbreaks in the sector that we see happening again now. Why is nothing being done about that? Is it that the Government is coming under pressure from business interests not to interfere with that business model? If that is the case, the public will not forgive the Government for its failures in this area.

The Opposition is united on this issue. We are all speaking with one voice. The public are saying it is obvious. Why is the Government not taking steps to control the importation of the virus? Let us look at what happened from the very beginning, at the half measures that were put in place. It started off with self-isolation. A tiny fraction of that was overseen and checked. I have been tracking it month on month since the very beginning. Then we moved to the advice being to restrict one's movements. There was no oversight or monitoring of this whatsoever. A fraction of people were contacted. The authorities even stopped ringing people and started sending out text messages. They no longer expected people to restrict their movements. Then we had what happened over Christmas, when people were advised to quarantine in their bedrooms when they came home for the holidays. That was absolute nonsense. Did the Minister really think anyone would adhere to that?

We are back into a similar situation whereby people coming here from most countries other

than the 20 that are on the designated list are being told to quarantine at home. That is nonsense. Quarantine at home is a contradiction in terms. Quarantine means isolating from other people so that one does not pass on the virus. People cannot do that if they are sharing accommodation with family members, house mates or whoever else. The idea is that gardaí are going to go around knocking on doors and checking that people are isolating in their own homes. The Minister did not even understand it himself. He fluffed it when he was trying to explain the process. I do not think any of his colleagues understand it or have any confidence that it will work. Again, it is just a case of throwing shapes and introducing half measures. The Government is not serious about this.

The Government's idea is to bring in legislation relating to 20 designated countries. I have checked the data that were provided in respect of arrivals here since Christmas. Approximately 75,000 people have flown into this country in that time. Of those 20 countries, only one is on the list, namely, the United Arab Emirates, UAE. Approximately 7% of all travellers are from the UAE. There is no information about the other 19 countries. What is the percentage of people who come here from the 20 countries the Government is designating? By all accounts, it seems to be a small percentage but we do not know because there seems to be no transparency. Will the Minister provide information on the number of people who are travelling here from those 20 countries? The data that he is providing at the moment are based on the last country of departure, not the original country of departure, and that is what we need.

I do not know if the Minister is listening or not but in the interests of transparency, it is important that he provides that information. Otherwise we will not know, even in the limited terms of those 20 countries, how many people are coming here or if the supposedly mandatory quarantine is having any impact on those numbers. The Minister needs to provide those figures, at a minimum, about the country of origin each week. When one looks at those figures, it is apparent that the larger numbers, relatively speaking, are coming from the United States and European countries. Nothing is being done about that. It is quite clear that the Minister is not serious.

I again stress that the difficulty we have with the high levels of the virus in this country is because of the level of importation. It started last March with people coming from Italy. The rugby was cancelled but large numbers of people travelled here. People from Beaumont Hospital contacted me prior to that weekend, pleading with me to get in touch with the Minister for Health because they knew that having large numbers of people coming in from the epicentre in Italy would be a disaster. I passed those concerns on to the then Minister but nothing was done about it. A major mistake was made when we allowed people to travel over to Cheltenham and back. We paid a significant price for that. The failure to deal with travel in the summer meant that we got the Spanish variant, which was responsible for what happened in the autumn. We know what happened at Christmas with Britain.

Now there are Brazilian and South African variants on this island. The next will undoubtedly be the Californian variant, and who knows what others. All of this was raised with the Minister and with his predecessor but action was not taken. Despite the fact that NPHET spelled out clearly what was required last May, we were consistently told by the Minister, Taoiseach and Tánaiste that the problem was not travel-related. We know that it absolutely was. The Minister quoted figures stating that travel-related cases were very low. That was only because we did not know where transmission was taking place. The latter was the result of the public health doctors being so under-resourced. In circumstances where public health doctors did have time to trace back by 14 days, as we should have been doing with all cases, they found that when one

person came back into this country, to somewhere in the west of Ireland, that individual infected 56 people. A small number of cases explained how one or two people coming in can infect their whole community, family members and so on. This was blindingly obvious. It should have been dealt with. It is not being dealt with now and it will not be dealt with under this legislation.

The Minister is not serious about what he is doing and this Government is not serious. People can only come to the conclusion that if this goes on, we will continue to have to live in a zombie state, with no prospect of things opening up to a substantial extent in the foreseeable future. People cannot continue to live like that. There has to be a pathway out of where we are at the moment. The only way we will chart that pathway is if measures are put in place to drive down the daily figures, if we have proper testing and retrospective tracing and if we stop the importation of the virus. That is the only way that we can get through this. If we are serious about this, we could get through it in the matter of two to three months and then we could then open up domestically. That is the reward for having a real, meaningful strategy. Unfortunately, that is not there and the Government is not serious about it. If the Government fails again with regard to travel and we face into a fourth lockdown in the not-too-distant future, it will not be forgiven. There are alternatives which have been spelled out to the Minister. We can do things much better and have a better future. People will not forgive the Government unless it does the right thing.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** There are significant concerns among members of the public regarding international travel and new variants. People can see clearly that it does not make sense to make significant sacrifices in their lives to drive down the infection levels in the State while leaving the back door largely open.

A point was raised earlier and it has not been properly addressed. I refer to the fact that a debate about quarantine should not be a debate about non-essential travel. It should be a debate about essential travel. Non-essential travel to the State at this point should be banned. We can then have a debate about what quarantine regime we should have for essential travel. That is the first point I want to make. There could and should be a ban on non-essential travel to the State at this point. That point has been brought up but has not been addressed properly, if at all, in the discussion to date.

Regarding some of the specifics of the proposed legislation, the model that the Government is putting forward for a quarantine regime is a for-profit model. It is based on a private sector model. It is not just gardaí who would have the power under the proposals raised, hotel managers would have extraordinary powers. I will make some points about that in a moment. Perhaps that is why the legislation is silent about what facilities would be available in quarantine locations. There is no mention of access to IT or television facilities, let alone access to medical or legal facilities.

Serious concerns have been raised outside the Dáil by organisations that know what they are talking about regarding the civil liberty implications of the Government's proposals. Two such organisations are the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre, an organisation which campaigns in respect of the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers. Serious concerns have been raised about giving the power to detain people without trial for two weeks not just to the State but to hotel managers. There are also concerns about the power to prevent people from leaving, in certain circumstances, even when a medical emergency arises. The Government, without any oversight from the Oireachtas, will be allowed appoint as appeals officer someone who has not necessarily had training of any kind

in human rights or in human rights legislation. There needs to be a debate about the kind of quarantine we are to have. The proposals for mandatory hotel quarantining the Government has put forward do not have my support but the basic point is that the debate should be on the issue of how to deal with essential visitors to the State. Non-essential visits and non-essential travel at this point should be banned. That is an ABC point that has not been addressed properly in this discussion.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The general feedback today has been that people will be generally supportive of the Minister if he will accept some or all of these amendments. The Rural Independent Group has put forward amendments. I thank Brian Ó Domhnaill and Mairead McGrath in the office who put time and effort into these constructive amendments. I see that other parties and Independent groups have done the same in an effort to be constructive. It looks like the Minister is going to rule out all of those amendments. If that is the case, he will have to accept that he is going to lose the confidence of the people and of many Deputies here who are trying to support and strengthen this legislation, which is not strong enough as it stands.

I have very serious concerns. Many of my constituents have contacted me about serious mental health issues that have arisen because of the lockdown. They have had to abide by the rules, and have continued to do so, but then they watch television and see what is rolling in and out of this country through our airports. They ask me and other Deputies what is going on. They ask why they have to abide by the rules while there are no rules or order for those coming in and out from other countries. It is free range. That is very unfortunate.

Other Deputies have spoken about constituents ringing about the vaccination roll-out. There is a very mixed and muddled message going out. There is continuous spin from the Government, which is given a free run on the airwaves, with regard to how successful the vaccination programme is. I am delighted for those who want the vaccine and are getting it but the vaccine is not successfully being rolled out if home helps are continuously ringing me. They are dealing with people one-to-one in west Cork but cannot get vaccinated yet while we are hearing about the success of the roll-out.

There are elderly people on Cape Clear, Sherkin Island, Bere Island, Whiddy Island, Heir Island, Long Island and Dursey Island. They do not know if someone is to come to the islands to give them their vaccinations. They are asking me but I cannot say. They are being asked to come to the local clinic in Clonakilty or Bantry. Many of the GPs are administering the vaccine in their own clinics now, which is great, but some of these elderly people are unable to leave their island. They ask me if a helicopter can be used to bring a doctor to the island so that they need not worry that they will be left behind.

Again, people are angered and upset when they see what is happening at our airports and people coming here for non-essential travel while they are in quarantine. I have raised this issue. I am worn out from saying it. I first said it nearly 12 months ago. It has a serious effect on my own constituency that we are not dealing adequately and correctly with this issue. If we did, we could reopen our country, including west Cork. At this time, we are unfortunately nowhere near that point. We are facing another season of massive disruption to tourism because we, and the Government, are failing to carry out the simple close-down of our airports with exceptions only for workers who are strictly essential. That is the way forward but, unfortunately, it is not being done.

People involved in the construction industry are coming to me. There are many building

projects out there. I really sympathise with those in construction. They are desperate to get back to work. Many of them have very essential work to do. Common sense should tell the Government that most of them could return to work because they work in a very safe environment but they are nonetheless being closed down. Individuals are contacting me who want to get homes built or sorted out or roofs repaired. They do not know whether they can do so.

The rules in place are varied from time to time. I know of one family in west Cork who went to buy a bit of farm equipment recently. That was meant to be essential travel as it was needed to continue their farm practices. They went from the Mizen Peninsula to a place near Bandon and were held up on the way back and given fines of €100 each. There was no appeals system in place for them. The gardaí in question got that 100% wrong. It was very unfair that these people were penalised to that extent because €300 is a lot to a farmer. They were able to identify where they had gone. Only two people went out to look at the machine in a shed. They made sure they had details of the person from whom they were buying. They had all of the proof for the gardaí to check but the rules are interpreted differently by the Garda, the Government and those who are rolling them out. This family on the Mizen Peninsula have been in contact with me and they are saying that every rule in the country is broken above in the airport but nobody gives a damn while everything is pushed to make sure that those in local communities are unable to break any rule. Even some who are not breaking rules are still being fined, which is terribly unfair. The Government needs to step up.

People contact me who want to attend church. They want to do things by the book and having been trying to. They find time for prayer. It is good for their mental health and that is what they want to do but sadly they are not allowed, although it seems to depend on what church one belongs to because most of us were sent a video on Facebook showing approximately 150 people praying somewhere in Dublin and there was no problem with that. The ordinary churchgoers I know of, however, are unable to attend their churches, which is a shocking indictment.

Young people are very stressed. In fairness, the Minister is human too and he understands that. Many young people are begging me to be allowed go here or there. I try to advise them not to. I, too, have children, who are now in their early 20s, and they have had their lives destroyed. They and other kids are always saying the same thing to me, that there is no law and order when it comes to the airport or people coming into this country while they have to keep to every rule and regulation applied. Many students have told me they are very stressed and that they found it difficult dealing with the exams this year. These are young people in third, fourth, fifth and sixth year. We should consider giving students the same choices next year that we are giving students this year because many of them have suffered severely. That would be a very fair way to deal with it. We are very much firefighting here. We are always doing something about something at the last minute when we should be looking ahead. We have failed to do that over recent months.

I am worn out from saying that those coming into the country should be given PCR tests. I was one of the first to suggest this because I come from the beautiful tourism area of west Cork. I wanted to be able to tell people that anyone coming to their area had been given PCR tests at the airports. I called for that very early. In that way we could at least say that these people had been tested and are entitled to travel. My request was denied and that denial came, and continues to come, at a very severe cost.

If we were identifying these things in April and May of last year, what is wrong with the Government that it cannot grasp the issue? It is letting things slip. These amendments are here

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to help and to ensure that these circumstances will not arise again. They are designed to tighten controls at our airports and ports with regard to people coming into the country, and who may be bringing in different variants, for a period of time. We should do it strong, fast and hard and then reopen our country. We should not wait another three, four or five weeks. This should have been done. We should be at the forefront but instead we are laggards. That is coming at a high cost to those people who have, unfortunately, contracted Covid-19 and to the hotel and tourism sectors, and it will come at a massive cost to the airports. I met officials from Cork Airport. I want to ensure that proper packages are in place for its survival and for the survival of the hotel sector. People want to know if they can travel into our country this year and that could have happened if we had moved strongly and quickly on this but unfortunately, we did not do so.

I urge the Minister to give serious consideration to these amendments. He should not deny individuals, groups and parties in the Dáil who are doing their best to work with him the chance to do so. If he does that, the public will lose confidence because they will see the mistakes that will result.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to inform the House that there are still five Members indicating at this stage. Deputy McNamara is next.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I will try to be reasonably brief so that everybody gets a chance to contribute. I understand there is not much time left. Is there another hour left for this debate? I do not intend to speak for an hour but want to make absolutely certain that everybody gets a chance to speak.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The guillotine comes down at 4.30 p.m.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** Okay and it is now approximately 3.30 p.m. I will be brief. We are dealing with section 3 of the Bill, if I am not mistaken and I will specifically speak to that-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are dealing with amendment No. 1 and amendments Nos. 31 to 42.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I will speak to the Bill as it would be if these amendments were introduced. I have no problem with quarantining *per se* but I think everybody agrees and all of the scientific advice indicates that if quarantine is to be introduced, it must be done properly or it will be utterly ineffective. It will be almost arbitrary, if not discriminatory, if it is not introduced properly. There is no point in quarantining people from a particular country if they enter the State at one entry point but not doing so if they use a different entry point. How does that make sense?

It is my understanding that we are proposing to quarantine people from certain countries because there are variants of the virus in those countries which are considered to be particularly dangerous. Alternatively, we can take the view that we will stop all Covid cases entering the country. If the purpose is to stop all Covid cases, what is the difference between a Covid case acquired on a beach in Bundoran, Benidorm or anywhere else in the European Union because there is freedom of movement, in theory? Obviously that freedom can be restricted on public health grounds but any restrictions must be proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory. Are we trying to stop every and any Covid case coming in as a way to avoid dealing with the fact that we have community transmission here that is very far from under control? In fact,

most medics agree that Covid-19 is endemic in our population, as it is in the populations of most states in the world at this stage. Covid-19 is endemic so I do not think we will suddenly get to zero here. In that context, what is the difference between a Covid case acquired here or elsewhere?

My understanding is that the medical priority is to stop variants coming in, particularly variants that people who have been vaccinated might not be immunised against or people who previously had the virus might not have a natural immunity to. I note that the Minister is nodding at that. That is an important priority but I do not see how it will be achieved by stopping people entering at some entry points but not at others or by only stopping people from certain countries. Even if those variants are currently only prevalent in some countries, that will change over time and the Minister has the right to designate other countries. At the moment, there is much talk about particular countries like Brazil but just because people are not coming from Brazil does not mean that they have not spent the last 48 hours in the company of somebody from Brazil, albeit in another country and they could be carrying the variant. We either quarantine fully or it is ineffective. There is a general acceptance of that point by medics. I note that Deputy Boyd Barrett has also said that and I agree with him.

I do not think it is feasible or legitimate to quarantine at ports if we are not quarantining at all entry points to the State, including right along the border with Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, I do not think we have the wherewithal right now to quarantine everybody entering this State. I simply do not think we have that capability but at the very least, everybody should be tested. At least then if variants are entering the country, we can keep track of that. We can have a public health system which can chase that. I know that involves our public health system chasing a problem rather than preventing one, but I am not convinced, given the number of people who cross the Irish Border every day, that everybody can be quarantined. If we are going to go down the road of quarantining, it must be done properly.

I wish to speak on a couple of other related issues. The onus of proving or demonstrating what is a reasonable excuse to leave one's home was not necessarily on the prosecutor but because it was a criminal prosecution, all elements would have to be proved by the prosecution. Now the onus is on the defendant, who has to show what is reasonable. There is a much bigger problem with that, however, in terms of deciding what is reasonable. Laws, to be enforceable, must be predictable. One has to be able to look at the law and with the assistance of legal advice, if necessary, understand what is prohibited and what is allowed. It is impossible to say or give legal advice on what is "reasonable" behaviour. I will give an example to illustrate my point. There is a general right to protest in the Irish Constitution but of course, that can be restricted by laws relating to public danger or public nuisance. Is it restricted by this legislation? It is not at all clear. There is a right to protest under the European Convention on Human Rights but again, that can be restricted on the basis of public health, public order and the usual bases for limitations of rights but it has to be done pursuant to law. Does the law prevent people from protesting? This is an issue that has arisen in my home town. A group of people, whose reason for protesting I do not necessarily agree with, were protesting, as far as I could see, in a manner which was responsible. They were standing outside in the middle of the square in the town, separated from each other and from other people, making their point. Other people took umbrage with that so they were protesting against the protest but they were also doing so in a responsible manner. There was no great degree of congregation involved, the protesters were outdoors and were wearing masks. In any event, it is either the case that both groups are covered by the right to protest or people are not allowed to protest any more in Ireland. I do not

know which is the case. I have benefitted from a legal education. Whether those who provided the education benefitted from providing it to me is another question but if I cannot see what is reasonable and what is not and if a lot of legal advisors cannot say what could be considered reasonable, then how is this law enforceable? How does it accord with the requirements of the rule of law which are that it is predictable and one can clearly see what is prohibited and what is not.

I mentioned the protest as an example. I am not in any way encouraging protest and I am certainly not encouraging protest which is in any way irresponsible or likely to contribute to the transmission of the disease. People think that they can travel up to 5 km from their home and anything else is prohibited but that, of course, is not the case. One cannot be more than 5 km from one's home for the purposes of exercise but one can travel as far as is necessary or reasonable from one's home for other purposes like a medical appointment or even shopping. Clearly if there is no shop within 5 km of one's home, it is not unreasonable to go to the nearest shop. However, if the nearest shop does not have all of the groceries that one normally eats in a week, is it reasonable to go further to the nearest larger shop? I question how this measure can be enforced. This proposed law is very general in parts and I dare say almost impossible to enforce. There is a specific measure regarding going to an airport or port for the purpose of leaving the State and that aspect is quite clear. When travel restrictions ease, however, it will be possible to go to Belfast for the purpose of travel. People will have left the State by the time they get to Belfast, clearly, but they can go there for the purpose of leaving the island. Will that be prohibited by the State once the current restrictions are eased slightly? Is making Belfast airport the busiest airport on the island the only thing this measure is going to achieve? I wonder about that aspect. If we cannot quarantine everyone, then at least we should be able to test everybody. I have called for testing of everybody entering the State since last May and it is not unreasonable.

On the issue of testing, I have a problem with this Bill because it specifies PCR testing. It is very unusual for a Bill like this to specify a particular type of testing. For example, the type of testing for road traffic offences is never specified in the relevant legislation. It is just stated that the Garda members can have an apparatus and then details of the apparatus will be set out in secondary legislation by the Minister. I have no problem with testing. In fact, it is vital that we test. If the advice the Minister has is that PCR testing is the best type of testing to use now, then that is the advice and I would expect the Minister to follow it.

All this legislation is intended to be in force for a short time initially, but if it rolls on for much longer we cannot be certain that in six months' time, PCR testing will be recognised as the only type of testing suitable for this situation. The Minister will not then be able to change it because it will be set out in primary legislation. When this legislation goes to the Seanad, I urge the Minister to consider having a reference to "testing" set out in the Bill, or the Act when it is ultimately enacted, with the Minister having the right to specify the type of testing, which would of course be done in accordance with medical and scientific advice. The type of testing recommended will inevitably change, just as testing and treatments for any virus, disease or infection changes over time. I do not think specifying the type of testing to be used is something suitable for primary legislation. I think it will create problems for the Minister or his successors down the line. They will then have to come back to amend primary legislation, when something like this should be delegated to being dealt with in secondary legislation.

I can see Deputy Shortall encouraging me to finish, but she takes as much time, if not significantly more time dare I say it, in her contributions here as I do. I am trying to be brief, but it is important that some points were made regarding this legislation. I have made them and I

thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to have done so.

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

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I welcome the opportunity to speak about this Bill on Committee Stage. I support several of the amendments. Amendment No. 31 is in my name and that of Deputy Cullinane.

I will echo several comments made thus far regarding the analysis that the Government's approach to this issue not being a serious one. It strikes me that the evidence shows that this Government dragged along in this regard. It has not just been this Government but the previous one as well. I remember discussing with the then Minister, Shane Ross, the need to improve measures regarding international travel at our ports and airports. Every step of the way, Sinn Féin has called for the Government of the day to implement stricter measures. We can track that process over time.

Let us recall the introduction of the passenger locator form. It was initially a voluntary measure but that caused a media furore. Out of embarrassment, the Government then made the passenger locator form mandatory. The Government then continuously failed to follow up in this regard. Several Deputies tracked this situation over time and the follow-up has been pathetic to the extent that it raises serious questions about the Government's commitment to and seriousness about having the passenger locator form as an effective measure.

What was the passenger locator form? It was the Government's tool to monitor adherence to quarantine and restriction of movement measures. The Government essentially turned a blind eye at every turn. Even when the Government was embarrassed by the figures which were made public, it did nothing to improve that situation. Those figures regarding adherence in respect of passenger locator forms ranged at various times from 7% to 18%. Some people got a follow-up call, but most people did not. Those people who got a follow-up call were not really obliged to do anything, including not even having to give accurate information. It was a tick-box effort. In fairness, the passenger locator forms then moved online and there was greater adherence to completing them in the first instance but it was not a measure the Government was really serious about.

The same thing could be said about the experience over time in respect of testing. My own background is in medical science and I could not believe the Government's reluctance to introduce a testing regime at our ports and airports. I raised this matter for months with various Ministers and all I got was an outline of what would happen in the future. Reference was made to all the considerations necessary, the weaknesses of testing and the complications to be taken into account. Under significant pressure, the Government did eventually introduce a testing regime before Christmas. That testing regime was voluntary and expensive. A mandatory testing regime was only introduced when we had in the region of 8,000 cases a day.

The test that was introduced was one undertaken 72 hours pre-departure. As NPHET has said about tests conducted 72 hours pre-departure, if I am going away, I can get a PCR test now, have my going away party, mingle with as many people as I like wherever I am and then I can still turn up at the airport in a couple of days' time with my negative PCR test. That is the weakness of that measure. It is acknowledged that test will miss in the region of 40% of cases and that is a statement of scientific fact. The Government and NPHET know that but they are still insistent that we not have a mandatory, across-the-board, post-arrival PCR testing regime

in place. In fact, Sinn Féin submitted an amendment to this Bill, which has been ruled out of order, that specifically requested the introduction of a mandatory, across-the-board, post-arrival PCR testing regime. It was ruled out of order because it might be a charge on the Exchequer. That is simply incredible.

In its letter of 14 January, NPHET requested “every effort be made to ensure that discretion as it currently applies to the need for restriction of movements and PCR testing post-arrival in Ireland is removed”. We have done nothing on the second aspect because we are afraid it might have a cost on the Exchequer. Regarding making every effort to address discretion on the restriction of movement, that is why the Opposition is broadly speaking with one voice regarding this group of amendments on this matter. The premise of the Government’s approach is that we will look at other countries, see when virus variants arise which are of concern and then consider the situation on an ongoing basis. We know, however, that the real world does not operate that way. At that stage, it is too late.

The Government is looking for credit in this regard. The Minister for Transport referred to this point earlier, and it is contained in the Government’s new living with Covid-19 document published only a few days ago. It was a case of saying look at how we quickly we responded when the British variant was identified but that is an example of why we need mandatory hotel quarantine for all countries, not just a limited number. We heard the Taoiseach outlining the difficulty with implementing and enforcing mandatory quarantine at home. He asked how it could be done, how we could check whether people were in their bedrooms. It cannot be done and that is the case for mandatory hotel quarantine across the board. We need to recognise that we are in a particular set of circumstances. We are not back in May, in the summer or even before Christmas. There are variants in the community and there is vaccine in the community, and that is the perfect environment for the development of vaccine-resistant variants. We really need to do something about that and we are in a position to do so, but we are not taking that decision here.

The British variant is now rampant in Ireland, as we know, and there is now the Bristol variant. We know that the South African variant is on the island, although we do not know to what extent. It is completely false to suggest that we know we have quashed it. We do not know the extent of it and have not genome-sequenced enough people. Furthermore, we do not know who may or may not have it in the community because of the limitations of our testing regime. The South African variant is cropping up in parts of London, from where direct flights arrive here every day, and there is also the Californian variant, with flights arriving from the United States a number of times a week.

In that context, we know we have to go further than is being proposed, which is why the Opposition is speaking with such a united voice. If the Government’s argument is turned on its head, to look at what is not being done, it follows the logic of what Deputies have been saying. The Bill is tokenism, a box-ticking exercise, and is not a real effort to deliver on a public health objective. That we do not have a timeline of when the measures will be introduced gives rise to further concern.

I highlight the opportunity we have now, as we had last summer. It was mentioned earlier that we essentially won the battle against Covid in this State last summer. We got down to single-digit figures. I recall those great days, reported on television and radio, when there were zero new cases. We have seen the publication from Professor Paddy Mallon and the genome-sequencing group that mapped the variants over time and throughout the country. The Teagasc

website contains really interesting information in that regard. It emphasises the need to take measures to grasp this opportunity and to go further than is being proposed in the Bill.

I call on the Minister to change tack and to recognise the logic of the argument being made by the Opposition and the considerable public support and demand. The public see the absolute contradiction and it is an insult to them and their efforts, and to the sacrifices that families and businesses have been making. We have had the longest lockdown in Europe and people do not see a return for it. They see the absolute contradiction of people taking advantage of the lax regime that is in place. I call on the Minister to change tack, to recognise the opportunity and to take on board the proposals of the Opposition.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the amendments. I will begin with an obvious observation. People have reached the pinnacle of their patience and are getting angry with the Government's messaging. When they witness people heading off on holiday, like the incident last week when a convoy of camper vans headed off from Rosslare Europort, while the majority of people are restricted from travelling more than 5 km from their front door, it is no wonder they are calling for mandatory hotel quarantine for all non-essential international travel, as the Sinn Féin amendment proposes.

People have given up their lifestyles and personal ways of existing to suppress this virus. In return, they expect the Government to do what is required at this time, namely, introduce full mandatory quarantine. We have compelled people to stay at home for months; likewise, the Government needs to put in place compelling measures to deal with people who are still travelling during a pandemic. Sinn Féin has put forward amendments that will require all non-essential arrivals to have a PCR test post arrival, improve data-sharing between North and South and ensure the Dáil has a say in the development of new regulations. I commend my colleagues on their work in strengthening the Bill.

We have witnessed many times the leaking of communications from Government sources to mainstream media, which is causing confusion, mental anguish and anger among workers and professionals. It should not and cannot be this way when it comes to the measures included in the Bill. I urge the Minister for Health to consider the prime example of New Zealand's mandatory quarantine website. It has crystal-clear, easily accessible information covering everything from what mandatory quarantine looks like to all the information partners needed to spread the message about the measures. It is not difficult to imagine the positive effect that this website has on anxieties, on reducing the number of mistakes and on increasing compliance through clear communication. It is worlds apart from the Travelling to Ireland page on the Irish Government's website. Communications require policy and investment. We are in agreement on the seriousness of mandatory quarantine measures and the management of the communication of such measures must be treated as such. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. If other countries are able to do this, so should we.

Like every Deputy in this House who has seen his or her constituents put so much effort into protecting their communities each day, surely this amendment, which seeks to shield and protect us from new variants arriving to our shores through international travel, must be supported.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I listened to a debate last week in which Deputy McNamara described what was going on in the House as a charade, while some of the speakers during today's debate have described it as theatre. I do not disagree with them, because what we have had in the course of the pandemic is theatre, with very little attention given to democracy and

to the work we should do to scrutinise legislation. This legislation is now before the House and, again, those in the Government parties have had little or no time to scrutinise it. The Opposition, which has a role to play, has not been listened to either. Legislation that is arrived at in this way cannot be, at all times, good legislation because not all the brains are contained in government. The contributions of many Deputies should be listened to and the mistakes in the context of legislation should be corrected before it is finally adopted.

The kind of incomplete legislation that there has been over recent months, some parts of it flawed, has led to what has happened in the course of this pandemic, namely, mixed messages from the Government. Each party of the Government is trying to get its message out, based on what it believes to be the legislation and the facts that were passed within it. They are getting it wrong and the public is being given a wrong message. It is not being given a clear message that can be followed without being changed and without making the political system and leadership look utterly foolish, and this adds to that confusion.

#### *4 o'clock*

Last year when we entered the pandemic, people around the world and certainly people in Ireland began to accept that this was a game changer and something they would need to deal with. They accepted that there was going to be a lockdown, and that they needed to co-operate and get on with it. Businesses and schools were closed and the economy and society were at a standstill. All they asked from the Government was to provide leadership. They wanted the Government to give the message as to what they were expected to do, and they would follow that. They wanted to be told what the plan for the way out might be and they would follow that. However, in return for the efforts they have made, they have got shambles after shambles and confusion about the direction we are taking.

The small businesses that make up the backbone of our economy by employing people in local communities want direction and support. The Government is simply not giving them enough support. In another mixed message, the Government has given support to some SMEs and excluded people aged over 66 who have got no support, which is a disgrace because they have also made a contribution to the economy. They also have costs and concerns. They have plans and ambitions for their businesses which have now been dented and put off course altogether with little acknowledgement from the Government. There were mixed messages about schools being closed. Exporters are in difficulty because of the new Brexit rules and regulations on top of the pandemic. It is now extremely difficult to keep the people on course with us.

This legislation needs to be adopted by the House because we need some form of quarantine. However, it sends out a mixed message of a law being passed which cannot be enforced or implemented at the level people believe it should be. Last year when people were returning from Cheltenham and Italy, the public were demanding the Government take action to stop the return to Ireland of people who did not necessarily need to come back or people who were travelling and should not have been travelling. Earlier speakers referred to essential and non-essential travel. The legislation gives a mixed message and it will lead to confusion.

I will support the Bill, but in some way the Government needs to interpret the Bill and put its best foot forward in communicating the message in a way that is clearly understood and which the Cabinet can follow and will not be divided on. The discussion of what each party thinks of each other and the leaders of each of those parties should be set aside with a view to finding a common platform to move forward because it is damaging the messaging system. The

public are asking for a clear message and no one can give it to them.

At a meeting last night, I asked the Minister about the vaccine. To exclude carers from the cohort of essential workers is simply wrong. I take that as an example. I am not lobbying to get somebody prioritised over somebody else. I am simply lobbying the Government to recognise that carers are essential workers and need to be vaccinated now. The care they are giving at home is an essential job. It is unsatisfactory and downright wrong that they would not be recognised and would not be getting the vaccine.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I hate to interrupt the Deputy. The issue of carers is very important, but it is not part of the amendment.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I am trying to explain that it is part of the mixed messaging-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It may well be.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** -----that this legislation and these amendments will lead to.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I know.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** Nobody else was interrupted when speaking.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I apologise, but I am conscious of time.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** I am talking about the mixed messaging that is going on. In dealing with this legislation I am asking that lessons be learned from that mixed messaging and that some corrections be made because the people are extremely angry with what is going on. They want to see a plan for the reopening of society and the economy. They want to know what their part in it is. They want to know what quarantining is all about and what it means for them. Some people have specific questions about their personal circumstances that they would like answered in the context of the legislation. I hope we will be able to find those answers and that they will be perfectly understood so that we can give some information to the general public.

This is an opportunity to look at the overall narrative that has been set out by the Government in respect of everything to do with quarantining, Covid and so on. The Government needs to take one step back and begin to provide the plans that are necessary to ensure that all of this can be implemented, that the course ahead of us is known and that we are getting buy-in from the general public. Right now, we do not have that buy-in or the leadership required, and too much mixed messaging is going on.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I apologise. My intervention was just on the carers' issue. That was all.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I wish to speak to amendments Nos. 34, 35 and 39 to 42, inclusive. I am conscious that time is marching on and I am anxious to find out whether this group of amendments will be accepted. I had much to say, but I will skip it. I ask the Minister to say if he is accepting amendment No. 1 and then we can move on from there. I take it he will not accept it.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** There are many questions. I was going to respond to everything. Is that-----

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I am asking if the Minister is accepting the amendment.

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**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister is entitled to respond in due course. He is being asked if he accepts the amendment. He can reply to that or not as he sees fit.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I think we will just wait until we get to that.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** In that case I would like to call a vote on amendment No. 1, because we need to put it on the record.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Amendment No. 1 is in the name of the Labour Party. I take it that it is being pressed.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** It is.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister has heard that the amendment is being pressed.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I wish to check if I am in order. My intention now is to respond to the Deputies on the group we are discussing.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister is perfectly entitled to respond to that. He should bear in mind that he has been asked a specific question on the amendment. That is all. He is perfectly within his rights to respond to the issues on those amendments.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

I thank the Deputies for what has been a very useful debate on the first group of amendments. I have taken many notes. I also recognise that other than one or two contributions, everybody who has participated in this debate on the Government and Opposition sides is trying to do the best thing for the country. We are trying to find the best solution we can, through legislation, to respond to the current situation. I thank Deputies for their amendments. Much work went into them. I also thank Deputies for their contributions. I acknowledge that the vast majority of contributions are made in the best of faith to try to find the best answer for the Irish people. That is exactly what I am doing, what the Government position is and what this legislation aims to do.

One of the big issues, which lies at the very core of this set of amendments, is whether we let public health decide which countries are subject to mandatory hotel quarantine, whether we let the Oireachtas decide or whether we have a blanket ban - as per these amendments - for all countries outside the island of Ireland. Essentially, the question before us with this amendment is who is best placed to decide that - the Oireachtas or public health. The legislation, as it is crafted, states that it is public health, whereas the amendment claims it should simply be a blanket ban.

There have been many references to there just being 20 countries on the list. I assure colleagues that that is absolutely not the case. It is not about 20 countries. It is a reality, as of now, that 20 countries have been designated as category 2 states. If the legislation passes, then those are the states for which hotel quarantine will apply. The argument being made is that hotel quarantine will therefore only apply to these 20 states. I assure the House that that is not the case. In fact, NPHET met earlier today and one of the things it discussed was the potential to add more states to the list. After this debate, I will be meeting the deputy Chief Medical Officer, CMO, to get his and NPHET's advice on whether we should add additional countries to the category 2 list.

If the Bill passes through the Dáil today, it is my understanding that it will be in the Seanad on Monday. It is entirely possible that by the time we debate this Bill in the Seanad, the list of 20 will be added to and the number could be significantly higher than that. I do not know yet because I need to meet the deputy CMO and get the advice of NPHEt. If the Bill then passes through the Seanad, it could be in excess of that number again by the time the President signs it into law, if he deems that appropriate, or shortly thereafter when the hotel quarantining system comes into operation. NPHEt is watching very closely what is happening in South America, Africa, the UK and elsewhere across the globe. I have no doubt that it will be advising me to add additional countries to the list. To date, I have taken that advice and we have designated the countries it recommended as category 2 countries. I reassure colleagues that this is not about 20, 30, 50 or 70 countries; it is about whether public health should advise the Government as to what those countries are. That is how the matter is framed.

I would make the same point on the considerations of NPHEt and the CMO. Section 38E empowers the Minister for Health to designate, in writing, additional states “where there is known to be sustained human transmission of Covid-19 or any variant of concern or from which there is a high risk of importation of infection or contamination with Covid-19 or any variant of concern by travel from that state”. Some Deputies have raised concerns and suggested that if we had a Brazilian variant, for example, the CMO could only advise the quarantining of travellers from Brazil and not states linked with travel from Brazil. The answer in the legislation is that the CMO can essentially advise that any state be added to the list through these mechanisms. It does not just have to be South Africa, for example. In that same vein, the deputy CMO recently advised on quite a number of states in Africa and they were added to the list. There is a very wide net of risk that NPHEt and the CMO can consider.

There is another issue here which is very important and speaks to another reason we should not just have a global ban. Colleagues appreciate that the legislation has to be legally robust. It has to be in line with EU law and the Constitution. I assure Deputies that there has been a lot of back and forth between the Departments of Health, Justice, Foreign Affairs, Transport and the Attorney General’s office to ensure that what we have before us is legally robust and constitutionally sound. As part of that, I am advised that we must have a test of proportionality so I ask Deputies to consider that. We are all here acting in good faith but I do not think any of us want to pass amendments which could ultimately lead to issues with legality. We all agree that this legislation has to be legally robust.

There has been much talk about this Bill being minimalist. Different language has been used, claiming that it is minimalist, that it is not serious, that it is a pretence or theatre-----

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** On a point of order, the question has been put and we would like a vote on this amendment. Under Standing Order 78, regarding the closure of a debate, I understand that it is our entitlement that a vote be taken. We are anxious that we have a vote on this. I ask the Minister to accept that and not to talk the clock down. This is an important group of amendments on which to vote and I ask that we move forward with that vote.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister is entitled to respond. There is no motion before me so I am going to let him respond. He has heard what the Deputy said and perhaps he will facilitate it.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** There has been much talk about this legislation being a sham, a piece of theatre and minimalist. It is very important that members of the public, who may be

watching this debate, understand that these allegations are untrue and that what we are doing is very real. I am basing that on the evidence. I have with me the latest report from the Department on quarantining across Europe. I will quickly go through the countries. I am happy to share this document with Deputies afterwards. One of the questions I asked the Department is whether there is mandatory hotel quarantine in European countries. There is none in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria or Croatia. Cyprus has it but only for travellers from the UK. There is no hotel quarantine in Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France or Germany. Greece has it in limited circumstances if a test comes back positive. Hungary has it for people arriving from the UK. In Iceland, it is only used if there is no alternative - in other words, people can quarantine in other places. There is none in Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and the Netherlands. Norway has it but only from high-risk areas and, critically, if a person is a resident or has a residence in Norway he or she does not have to go to the hotel but can go to the residence. There is no hotel quarantine in Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland but in the UK, which is at the end of the list, the situation is similar to ours. It was mentioned earlier that the UK has more countries on its list than we do, which is true, but I believe our list will grow. As a rebuttal, if I may, to the allegations that this is somehow a pretence or a sham or minimalism, they are the facts. This system of hotel quarantine, as the evidence shows, will be, by a long way, the most restrictive and the most comprehensive in Europe, other than the UK, and we are largely in line with the UK. It is important that the Irish people understand that this is serious legislation which brings in serious measures relating to the curtailment of people's liberties and it does so in a robust way. It is a legally sound mechanism that gets to what many Deputies here are looking for, which is for more countries to be added to the list.

On the subject of the UK, I wish to acknowledge that to his credit, Deputy Cullinane has been very constructive, generally, during Covid debates. He does not always, nor should he, agree with Government policy but I acknowledge that he always has been very constructive. However, I question the contributions from Sinn Féin today because its Deputies have used very strong, accusatory and dramatic language about what we are doing here. It is the case that England and Scotland have hotel quarantine in place, as does Wales by proxy through England. Ireland, hopefully, will soon have it. The one jurisdiction on the two islands that does not have in place a system of hotel quarantine and is not planning to put in place such a system is Northern Ireland.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** That is because there is a travel ban.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The only jurisdiction where Sinn Féin is in government is the only jurisdiction that is not looking at hotel quarantine. That is relevant to this debate. I reiterate that there has been very constructive dialogue on a lot of issues, which I accept, but on this issue it is hard not to conclude that Sinn Féin is speaking out of both sides of its mouth. They are demanding it here in Ireland, but they are not looking for it where they can implement it in Northern Ireland.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** There is a travel ban, Minister.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** As I said, that is relevant to this debate. I also could not find any media coverage where Sinn Féin vocally opposed and criticised the introduction in the UK, but it is doing so here. It is difficult not to conclude that there is politics being played here, which I do not think serves what we are all trying to do, which is to bring in a legally sound and robust mechanism.

There were questions around consultation with the Garda. The Garda Síochána was consulted. Several of the amendments which I have tabled were based on that consultation. I want to clarify that my understanding is there was no consultation with the representative groups, but the Garda Síochána was consulted.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Under Standing Order 78, I propose, “That the question be now put.”

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I have given the Minister an opportunity to respond. Deputy Duncan Smith has called for the closure of the debate and for the vote to be formally put. The Minister still has not indicated if he is accepting amendment No. 1. I presume he is not accepting it.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Do I conclude my responses now?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Yes. I am presuming from the Minister’s reply that he is not accepting amendment No. 1.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** No.

Amendment put:

<i>The Committee divided: Tá, 58; Níl, 86; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	
<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	
<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	
<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	
<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	

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<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	
	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
	<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	
	<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	
	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	
	<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	
	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	

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	<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	
	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	
	<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
	<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	
	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	
	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>	
	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	
	<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Alan Kelly and Duncan Smith; Níl, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers.

Amendment declared lost.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am required now to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of 24 February: "That the amendments set down by the Minister for Health for Committee Stage and not disposed of are hereby made to the Bill, in respect of each of the sections undisposed of the section or, as appropriate, the section, as amended, is hereby agreed to in Committee and the Preamble and Title are hereby agreed to in Committee, the Bill, as amended, is accordingly reported to the House, Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed". Is that agreed? It is not agreed.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 131; Níl, 11; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	

<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>		
<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>		
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>		
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>		
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>		
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>		
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>		
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>		
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>		
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>		
<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>		
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>		
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>		
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>		
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>		
<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>		
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>		
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>		
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>		
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>		
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>		
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>		
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>		
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>		
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>		
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>		
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>		
<i>English, Damien.</i>		
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>		
<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>		
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>		
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>		

<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>		
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>		
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>		
<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>		
<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>		
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>		
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>		
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>		
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>		
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>		
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>		
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>		
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>		
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>		
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>		
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>		
<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>		
<i>Lahart, John.</i>		
<i>Lawless, James.</i>		
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>		
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>		
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>		
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>		
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>		
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>		
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>		
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>		
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>		
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>		
<i>Nash, Ged.</i>		

<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>		
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>		
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>		
<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>		
<i>Ó Riordáin, Aodhán.</i>		
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>		
<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

<i>Ward, Mark.</i>		
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mick Barry and Paul Murphy.

Question declared carried.

**An Bille um an Seachtú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Cearta Geilleagracha, Comhdhaonnacha agus Cultúir), 2018: An Dara Céim (Atógáil) [Comhaltaí Príobháideacha]**

**Thirty-Seventh Amendment of the Constitution (Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) Bill 2018: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]**

Thairg an Teachta Thomas Pringle an tairiscint seo ar an Céadaoin, 27 Eanáir 2021:

“Go léifear an Bille an Dara hUair anois.”

The following motion was moved by Deputy Thomas Pringle on Wednesday, 27 January 2021:

“That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

Atógadh an díospóireacht ar leasú a 1:

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

Dáil Éireann resolves that the Thirty-Seventh Amendment of the Constitution (Economic, Social And Cultural Rights) Bill 2018 be deemed to be read a second time this day eighteen months, to allow for greater analysis of the complex issues concerned and for such considerations to be taken into account in further scrutiny of the Bill.

- (Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Colm Brophy).

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to amendment No. 1 to the Second Reading motion on the Thirty-Seventh Amendment of the Constitution (Economic, Social And Cultural Rights) Bill 2018. On Wednesday, 27 January, 2021, on the

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question “That the amendment be made” a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Cuireadh an leasú.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 58; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staan</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	

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<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>		
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		

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<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Catherine Connolly and Thomas Pringle.

Amendment declared carried.

Faisnéiseadh go rabhthas tar éis glacadh leis an leasú.

Aontaíodh an tairiscint mar a leasaíodh.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

### **Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (Covid Restrictions Support Scheme) (Percentage Adjustment) Order 2021: Motion (Resumed)**

The following motion was moved by the Minister for Finance on Wednesday, 27 January 2021:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (Covid Restrictions Support Scheme) (Percentage Adjustment) Order 2021,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 13th January, 2021.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after “Dáil Éireann on 13th January, 2021”:

notes that:

— businesses have been significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under public health regulations to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic;

— the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme has been a vital and effective financial support for many businesses that have been significantly impacted by Covid-19 restrictions; and

— many businesses that have been significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under public health restrictions to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are not eligible to make a claim under the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme on the grounds that they do not ordinarily carry on a business activity on a fixed business premises and/or cannot demonstrate to the Revenue Commissioners that, as a direct consequence of Covid-19 restrictions, customers are prohibited or significantly restricted from accessing their business premises;

recognises that:

— as a result of these eligibility criteria, many businesses that do not qualify to make a claim under the Covid Restriction Support Scheme are struggling to meet non-payroll expenses;

— liquidity support to these vulnerable businesses is essential to assist them in meeting their non-payroll expenses and to help ensure they are in a position to survive this crisis period and support the post-crisis recovery; and

— the weekly cost of the Covid Restriction Support Scheme has been significantly less than that first projected by the Government when the Scheme was introduced; and

calls on the Government to amend the eligibility criteria by providing that:

— a person carrying on a business activity may be eligible to make a claim under the Covid Restriction Support Scheme provided that they can demonstrate that the turnover of the business activity in the claim period will be no more than 25 per cent of the relevant turnover amount;

— a person is not disqualified from making a claim under the Covid Restriction Support Scheme where their business activity is not ordinarily carried on from a business premises which is permanently fixed in place; and

— to be eligible to make a claim under the Covid Restriction Support Scheme, a person shall not be required to demonstrate to the Revenue Commissioners that, as a direct consequence of Covid-19 restrictions, customers are prohibited or significantly restricted from accessing their business premises.”

- (Deputy Pearse Doherty).

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to amendment No. 1 to the motion regarding the proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (Covid Restrictions Support Scheme) (Percentage Adjustment) Order 2021. On Wednesday, 27 January, 2021, on the question, “That the amendment be made”, a division was claimed, and that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

*The Dáil divided: Tá, 60; Níl, 84; Staon, 0.*

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<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stáon</i>
<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	
<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	
<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	
<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	
<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	
<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	
<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	
<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	

*Dáil Éireann*

<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	
	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	
	<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	
	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
	<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	
	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	
	<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
	<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	
	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	
	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>	
	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	
	<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>	

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

Amendment declared lost.

Note that in relation to the above division, Deputy Michael McNamara intended that his vote be recorded as ‘Tá’ rather than as ‘Níl’.

Motion agreed to.

*5 o'clock*

### **Household Utility Bills Support: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Claire Kerrane on Wednesday, 3 February 2021:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— 475,364 people received the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) last week, an increase of 15,443 on the previous week;

— the society of St. Vincent de Paul estimates that energy poverty affects one in six households in Ireland, and is concerned that a significant proportion of households will be in energy debt as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic;

— a person who loses their job cannot access the Fuel Allowance until they are in receipt of a Jobseeker’s payment for more than 390 days (over 15 months);

— the Fuel Allowance is not available to recipients of the PUP;

— the PUP rates have not been adjusted to take into account increased heating costs during winter months and households currently have to make their weekly payments stretch even further to meet these costs; and

— many households on reduced income as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic are ineligible for the Fuel Allowance due to the limited qualifying criteria, which does not consider the financial impact of the pandemic and the urgent support these households need during difficult winter months; and

calls on the Government to:

— suspend the requirement that a person who loses their job must be in receipt

of a Jobseeker's payment for over 15 months before they can qualify for the Fuel Allowance, for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic, and review the qualifying period thereafter;

— extend the Fuel Allowance of €28 per week to PUP recipients;

— establish a discretionary fund for Covid-19 utility debt, of an initial five million euro, to provide assistance to individuals and households struggling with Covid-19 related heating and electricity costs;

— ensure that the budget for the Exceptional Needs Payment is sufficient, as well as ensuring access to and flexibility from Community Welfare Officers; and

— make a double payment of the Fuel Allowance to all existing recipients for two weeks in February.

The following amendment to the motion was agreed on Wednesday, 3 February 2021:

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

“notes that:

— the Government is firmly committed to targeting supports to those who need them most and is also committed to combatting fuel poverty by a variety of measures and in supporting those on low incomes with their home heating costs through the Fuel Allowance scheme and other supports;

— the Government is constantly monitoring the supports it provides during this Covid-19 pandemic;

— the budget for the Supplementary Allowance Scheme is not capped and is operated in a discretionary and flexible manner by Community Welfare Officers in the Department of Social Protection;

— the use of targeted schemes such as the Supplementary Welfare Allowance ensures that resources are targeted where they are needed most;

— the Government is providing unprecedented support through the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme to those who have lost employment during the period of the pandemic;

— since last March over 14 million PUPs have been issued, with over 820,000 people receiving support under the scheme and the total cost of PUP to date is about €5.5 billion;

— approximately 443,000 people have benefited from the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme at a total cost of over €4.5 billion; and

— the rates of PUP are more than double the support available to impacted workers in Northern Ireland where payments are about £100 weekly; and

further notes that:

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— over 372,000 households will be supported in the 2020/2021 fuel season starting October 2020 and concluding in the week of 9th April, 2021, at a cost of over €300 million;

— an estimated 465,000 households receive electricity or gas allowances through the Household Benefits Package throughout the full year at a cost of €265 million annually;

— the Fuel Allowance was increased by €3.50, from €24.50 per week to €28 per week, with effect from 4th January, 2021, the highest weekly rate ever, and other targeted increases to Qualified Child payments and the Living Alone Allowance also took effect in January;

— the total value of the fuel allowance in Ireland across a full free fuel season is €784 per household, which far exceeds the value of equivalent payments in neighbouring jurisdictions such as Northern Ireland where, for example, the Winter Fuel Payment ranges in value from £100 to £300;

— the fuel allowance season was extended in 2020 by four weeks at a cost of almost €37 million, and the Government will, as it does every year, consider if the 2021 fuel allowance season should be extended beyond 9th April depending on the economic circumstances and prevailing weather conditions;

— in addition to the Fuel Allowance, the Government provides targeted supports to people experiencing exceptional costs or financial difficulties through the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, and payments can be, and are made, under this scheme in respect of exceptional heating costs;

— the Government is committed to supporting the retrofitting of the housing stock, which is the ultimate solution to fuel poverty;

— this year will see the largest budget for retrofitting in the history of the State, including over €100 million in capital funding to support lower income households to retrofit their homes through the Warmer Homes Scheme, representing a €47 million increase on the 2020 allocation; and

— in addition, funding of €65 million is being made available in 2021 through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to support the retrofitting of up to 2,400 social housing homes.”

- (Minister for Social Protection)

Debate resumed on the following question: “That the motion, as amended, be agreed to.”

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding household utility bills support, as amended. On Wednesday, 3 February 2021, on the question, “That the motion, as amended, be agreed to”, a division was claimed and that division must be taken now.

Question put: “That the motion, as amended, be agreed to.”

*The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 61; Staon, 0.*

*Dáil Éireann*

<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stáon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	

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<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

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

Question declared carried.

### **Covid-19: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Alan Kelly on Wednesday, 10 February 2021:

“That Dáil Éireann: notes that:

— in March 2020, the Government published ‘Ireland’s National Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 (Coronavirus)’, and outlined proposed public health decisions and actions with the stated purpose of containing, delaying and mitigating the spread of the virus;

— by 4th February, 2021, 3,586 people had died with Covid-19 in the State, with another 1,899 having died in Northern Ireland;

— case numbers are over 200,000 in the State and 105,000 in Northern Ireland, more than 4 per cent of the population of the island of Ireland;

— the island has experienced three waves of infection, with the most recent wave, post-Christmas, being the highest in terms of overall infection and mortality and imposing the greatest pressure on the health service;

— our hospitals have struggled greatly to deal with the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, with over 2,000 Covid-19 patients in hospital at a point in late January;

— the economy has been shut down three times, for almost six months over the past ten months, and the movements of people have been severely restricted;

— the Government’s ‘Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid19’, published in September 2020, has failed to cope with the most recent wave of infection and the emergence of more transmissible and lethal variants of the virus; and

— Ireland has an open border with Northern Ireland that should not be sealed, and essential travel must be allowed to continue on our island;

further notes that:

— repeated surges in Covid-19 infections and deaths, and repeated lockdowns now demonstrate the failure of a strategy of containment, delay and mitigation;

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— vaccination alone is not a ‘silver bullet’ solution in the short to medium-term, and will not by itself rule out the need for further lockdowns;

— a comprehensive strategy to eliminate community transmission of Covid-19 in Ireland, also known as a ‘Zero-Covid’ approach, which has been recommended by the Independent Scientific Advocacy Group, is now urgently required;

— new variants, due to mutation of the virus, present a significant risk and that it is therefore vital to take fullest advantage of our island status, and to significantly restrict all movement onto the island, or, in the absence of an all-island strategy, into the State; and

— women are disproportionately bearing the burden from the Covid-19 pandemic, as has been laid out by the Covid Women’s Voices group; and

calls on the Government to:

— adopt a national aggressive suppression strategy for Covid-19, with the aim of eradicating community transmission and getting overall case numbers down to double digits, and then using aggressive testing and tracing against any outbreaks;

— prevent travellers from boarding aircraft or boats bound for Ireland in the absence of a negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test;

— introduce mandatory hotel quarantine for all travellers arriving by sea and air into the State, with the exception of designated essential and logistics workers, with PCR testing at arrivals and a follow-up test after five days;

— adequately resource the testing and tracing system to increase capacity for contact tracing;

— develop, with the Northern Ireland authorities, a fully integrated cross-border contact tracing system;

— increase permanent capacity in our public hospitals, including by nationalising private hospital capacity where necessary, as called for by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation;

— target areas of significant risk of Covid-19 outbreaks for serial testing, including healthcare settings and other workplaces where a higher risk of infection exists;

— implement rapid antigen testing in congregated settings, where appropriate;

— roll out rapid antigen testing in the community, including in our schools when they reopen, and serial PCR testing in healthcare facilities to control outbreaks;

— ensure that only genuinely essential employees are compelled to work outside the home by empowering the Health and Safety Authority to survey and inspect workplaces with 20 or more employees;

— pay student nurses who are working in our hospitals at the health care assistant rate that they were previously paid during the first wave of the pandemic;

— implement a support package for the aviation and hospitality sectors, recognising that they will not be able to reopen until Covid-19 is aggressively suppressed and a significant proportion of the population are vaccinated;

— publish, on a daily basis, the figures on the total number of people vaccinated, with details on the percentage of different age groups and priority groups that have been vaccinated;

— recognise the importance of investing in our public health system, address the longstanding concerns about the inadequate resourcing of public health in Ireland and implement consultant-level contracts for public health doctors;

— assess the public health cost implications arising from the effects of ‘Long Covid’;

— recognise the disproportionate impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on women, and to address this by implementing measures recommended by the Covid Women’s Voices group;

— continue the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme until the end of 2021, and further commit to embedding such schemes into the labour market structure with important employment rights and other conditions attached as the scheme evolves;

— ensure that there is a moratorium on all evictions and rent increases until the economy has fully reopened, and call on banks to provide payment breaks to those in need, without charging any additional interest;

— proactively pursue a joint strategy and joint measures with the Northern Ireland Executive, in order to develop an all-island strategy to eliminate community transmission on the island;

— introduce Garda checks five kilometers from the border with Northern Ireland; and

— support the international campaign, supported by Oxfam and other organisations, for vaccines to be made available for all people, in all countries, free of charge as soon as possible.”

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“recognises:

— that like most of Europe, Ireland experienced increasing Covid-19 infection rates over the winter months and by December and January infection rates were accelerating rapidly with consequent increases in hospitalisation and mortality rates;

— that the Government, following advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), took decisive and proactive action and put in place Level 5 restrictions from 31st December, in order to reduce the rate of infection and to prevent mortality from the disease;

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— the widespread commitment and continued adherence to these public health restrictions by the Irish public; and

— that health and social care workers have been at the forefront of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland since the beginning of the pandemic, and they have worked tirelessly to care for people who have become infected, while also delivering non-Covid services across the breadth of our health and social care services;

notes that the measures taken to address the third wave of the virus have:

— resulted in significant suppression of viral transmission, and acknowledging that in January Ireland had one of the highest incidences of the disease in Europe, Ireland is now suppressing this third wave of Covid-19 infection faster than any other country in Europe;

— following a surge in incidence, succeeded in reducing incidence, and hospitalisations, Intensive Care Unit admissions and mortality are now stabilising/declining; and

— enabled the successful ongoing roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, which, up to 3rd February, has resulted in over 200,000 Covid-19 vaccines administered, with 67,000 people fully vaccinated, having received their first and second doses and this is a key element of the ongoing public health response;

cautions:

— that notwithstanding the roll-out of vaccines, the current public health protective measures like social distancing, face masks and respiratory etiquette will continue to be fundamental components of the approach to the prevention and mitigation of Covid-19; and

— that the current experience of countries across the 27 European Union (EU) Member States/United Kingdom and elsewhere, demonstrates the fragility of the epidemiological situation in Ireland and the threat still posed by the Covid-19 pandemic;

acknowledges that:

— the emergence of Covid-19 worldwide:

— has taken a significant personal, societal and economic toll;

— has had a significant impact on the ongoing delivery of health and social care; and

— resulted in a very significant increased requirement for infection prevention and control (IPC) capacity across the health system;

— these impacts are inextricably linked to the levels of transmission of Covid-19 in the community and underline the need for continued widespread compliance with public health guidelines as they evolve; and

— in light of the foregoing, the Government:

— is implementing an extensive and comprehensive strategy to the Covid-19 pandemic, including a range of public health restrictions and investments in public health capacity in line with the national framework for living with Covid-19;

— has taken measures in best interest of public health, having regard also to maintaining

economic and social activity as safely as possible; and

— has taken measures in best interest of public health, having regard also to maintaining economic and social activity as safely as possible; and

— has ensured that the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is providing support across all sectors of the economy to support viable firms and encourage employment in the midst of these very challenging times; to date, subsidy payments of almost €2 billion have been made and Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) relief worth over €300 million has been granted to over 46,000 employers in respect of over 515,000 employees;

— has supported businesses via the Pandemic Stabilisation Recovery Fund (PSRF) and the Irish Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), as part of the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA), has allocated €2 billion for deployment from the PSRF to support businesses that have been impacted by the pandemic and to invest in their recovery phase;

in particular, welcomes the significant investment in the vaccine programme and the successful commencement to the roll-out of the programme starting with the most vulnerable groups;

further acknowledges that testing and contact tracing are key components of the response to the pandemic and recognises the robust testing strategy under the guidance of NPHET and the comprehensive testing and tracing operation that has been put in place by the Health Service Executive, and welcomes the significant investment provided to the testing and tracing programme, amounting to €445 million in 2021, and the ongoing recruitment of dedicated community swabbers and contact tracing staff;

further recognises the very significant ongoing serial testing programme in residential care facilities and food production facilities, and welcomes the Government commitment to continue the programme of serial testing in those most vulnerable settings;

further welcomes the ongoing consideration of all appropriate mechanisms to target testing to detect and mitigate the impact of the virus across the population including the adoption of appropriate testing technologies based on evidence and evaluation;

also acknowledges the important role of strong measures in relation to travel in the wider strategy for the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, and welcomes the requirement for passengers arriving to Ireland from overseas to present a Covid-19 passenger locator form and evidence of a negative pre-departure test taken within 72 hours of travel upon arrival;

furthermore welcomes:

— the work on new travel measures, including the drafting of primary legislation to provide for designated quarantine facilities, and the introduction of mandatory home quarantine for arriving passengers, with limited exemptions;

— the investment in hospital capacity, including €600 million in the Winter Plan 2020/2021 and Budget 2021 to provide for a permanent increase in hospital beds (excluding critical care beds) of 1,146 above the number in the system at the end of 2019;

— the Strategic Plan for Critical Care which aims to bring permanent adult critical care capacity in Ireland to 321 by the end of 2021, and to 446 in the long-term, in line with the

recommendations of the Health Service Capacity Review on critical care; and

— significant additional funding in 2021 to enhance the health service's IPC responses in an integrated way across acute and community services;

further notes the agreement with 18 private hospitals to provide up to 30 per cent of their capacity, if required, to deal with the current surge of Covid-19 cases;

acknowledges the need to strengthen and reform how public health medicine operates, including the introduction of a consultant-led public health model, and notes the commitment to significant investment in public health with the announcement of plans to double the current workforce by recruiting an additional 255 permanent staff, at an annual cost of over €17 million;

furthermore, recognises the disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on specific groups and in particular:

— the significant contribution made by women to the Covid-19 response, and the disproportionate burden which the pandemic has placed on women;

— the need for consistent consideration of how best to support women throughout the pandemic, including our predominantly female health and social care workforce and informal and family carers, within the context of the overall response; and

— the work of the Women's Health Taskforce, which is a priority in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, and the additional funding allocated to the taskforce and key services for women, including maternity and gynaecology services, in Budget 2021;

acknowledges:

— that Covid-19 is a global challenge requiring close international collaboration and commits to continue the close and productive cooperation with Northern Ireland to foster commonality in approaches, where possible, in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic;

— that the Government is negotiating its participation and contribution to Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) as part of a Team Europe effort following the EU joint engagement to mobilise resources in a coherent and efficient way in the context of the EU Global Response to coronavirus and welcomes that Team Europe's engagement will accelerate global efforts to bring the pandemic under control and scale up distribution of a successful vaccine as soon as it becomes available;

— that Covid-19 requires close collaboration across Government and across all sectors and welcomes a record level of funding for tourism of just under €221 million that has been provided, and over €100 million in support that has already been made available under schemes for Irish airlines and airports; and

— the advice to work from home where possible;

commits that:

— the Government will continue to monitor the measures that have been put in place in response to the economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, to support viable firms and encourage employment, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme; and

— regular assessments will continue to be carried out to determine whether it is necessary to adjust such schemes to better fulfil the objectives of providing the necessary stimulus to the economy so as to mitigate the effects on the economy of Covid-19, or to facilitate the efficient use of Exchequer resources and protect the public finances;

further again, acknowledges the widespread support and adherence to public health restrictions by the public and the solidarity shown by communities and citizens, in line with the Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19;

recognises the reduction in the disease incidence, with Ireland suppressing this third wave of Covid-19 infection faster than any other country in Europe and the need to continue to maintain public health protective measures to minimise the spread of Covid-19;

welcomes the protective measures in place to ensure ongoing provision of healthcare including €4 billion to protect, reform and expand health and social care services and implement universal healthcare in Budget 2021;

highlights the measures put in place to mitigate the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, including the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment and supports for businesses, including businesses and pubs in rural areas;

emphasises the measures put in place to protect the elderly, vulnerable groups and those experiencing loneliness and social isolation, including increased funding for mental health services, extra counselling supports, home-help supports, and the expert panel on long-term residential care; and

strongly values the contribution of health and social care workers at the forefront of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.”

- (Minister for Health)

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to amendment No. 1 in the name of the Minister of Health to the motion regarding a national aggressive strategy for Covid-19. Yesterday on the question, “That the amendment be made”, a division was claimed and that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 90; Níl, 53; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staan</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	

<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	

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<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>		
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>		
<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>		
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>		
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Alan Kelly and Duncan Smith.

Amendment declared carried.

Amendment No. 2 not moved.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

**Insurance (Restriction on Differential Pricing and Profiling) Bill 2021: Second Stage  
(Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Pearse Doherty on 17 February 2021: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“Dáil Éireann resolves that the Insurance (Restriction on Differential Pricing and Profiling) Bill 2021 be deemed to be read a second time this day nine months, to allow for greater analysis of the complex issues concerned following the publication of the Central Bank’s final report on differential pricing later this year; and for such considerations to be taken into account in further scrutiny of the Bill.”

-(Minister of State at the Department of Finance)

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to amendment No. 1 in the name of the Minister for Finance to the Second Stage motion on the Insurance (Restriction on Differential Pricing and Profiling) Bill 2021, taken on Wednesday, 17 February 2021. On the question, “That the amendment be made”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2) that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	

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<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	

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<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

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

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank all the members of the service for dealing so efficiently with the very substantial voting block today. Go raibh maith acu ar fad.

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** This matter arises from the annual sustainable progress index published yesterday by Social Justice Ireland, which mentions Ireland's progress implementing the UN sustainable development goals. I compared this year's index to last year's and I note that there has been little or no positive change in how the Irish economy is integrating sustainable development and well-being objectives into everyday strategies and actions. Most worryingly, consecutive reports highlight poor and deteriorating performance on particular goals, including sustainable development goal 7, affordable and clean energy; goal 12, responsible consumption and production; goal 13, climate action; and goal 14, life below water. In addition, we are making poor progress in our Aichi biodiversity targets. This year, Ireland has retained its last place position in the index for these goals and targets. It is dead last, with the wooden spoon. These goals all speak strongly to core Green Party objectives. If I see no significant improvement in these areas, my voters will rightly ask me why.

Nearly six years ago, Ireland played an historic role in the process to agree and adopt Agenda 2030 and the sustainable development goals, SDGs, as co-chair alongside Kenya. The adoption of Agenda 2030 was one of the pivotal international moments in 2015, with countries from all over the world coming together and committing to do more for fair, equitable and environmentally sustainable development. I was pleased to note that the Taoiseach, in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations last September, reaffirmed our nation's commitment to the sustainable development goals and Agenda 2030, but this needs to be more than an empty formula and a shiny pin on the lapel, which I notice that both the Minister and I are wearing this evening.

If this is to be the decade of action on the SDGs, we need concrete, measurable actions that help us to live up to the commitments that Ireland played such a key role in framing. I am wary of the perception that the SDGs are something applicable to developing countries - that they are something that we work on *thar lear, i bhfad uainn i gcéin*. For the SDGs to be effective, they need to be universally applied, as much here as anywhere else. We have seen some concrete progress in this Dáil, with the establishment of the all-party Oireachtas group on sustainable development goals. The SDGs and their attainment are now written into the Standing Orders of each committee.

It should be acknowledged that a national implementation plan has been in place since 2018, though I would question the level of oversight and reporting which exists to ensure the plan is being fully followed through. I have submitted parliamentary questions to each Department to ask which of the 169 sub-targets of the 17 goals it has identified as being relevant to the Department's work and whether the commitments to the SDGs will be reflected in the new strategy statements. The answers I have received have varied from excellent, and I give particular credit to the Department of Finance for its response, to abject. Ireland's shortfalls in meeting our goals and targets demonstrate a failure to enshrine one of the key tenets in Agenda 2030, which is universality. This means that everyone has a role to play and needs to work together. At Government level, this means full endorsement, understanding and leadership of all relevant Ministers and Departments, not just one or two.

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I understand that the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has been leading Ireland's implementation of the goals, including through the development of implementation plans, the co-ordination of an interdepartmental working group and engagement with civil society organisations and stakeholders. Will the Minister inform the House of the nature of the work being undertaken?

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and I hope I can do exactly what he suggested. I welcome the opportunity to set out the actions we are taking with regard to the SDGs. The programme for Government was developed with close consideration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and provides specific reference to delivering on objectives in line with the SDGs in many areas. The Government has committed to strengthen engagement and awareness at local level, with a commitment to ensure local authorities have regard to the national planning framework and alignment to the 17 goals when drafting development plans.

The integration of the sustainable development goals at a local level as well as a new national SDG implementation plan, committed to be published later this year, will be vital to support progress towards achieving Agenda 2030. The first Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020, published in 2018, established a framework for how Ireland will implement the SDGs and identified 19 specific actions for delivery in this period. I will now highlight some of these key actions.

Ireland presented its first voluntary national review to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2018. This report set out our progress with the goals. Ireland has committed to prepare a further report to the UN in 2022.

The national SDG stakeholder forum was established and has held six meetings to date. While Covid-19 disrupted planned meetings in 2020, further meetings will be arranged this year and are likely to be taken in a virtual or hybrid format. Twelve SDG champions were appointed to raise awareness of the goals within their respective sectors. The initiative has been extremely successful in its outreach to different communities and groups. A review of the champions programme and stakeholder forum will be finalised as part of the development phase of the next implementation plan.

An SDG policy map has been published, which enhances the ability of stakeholders to track Ireland's implementation of specific goals and targets. It also supports and enhances cross-Government engagement in implementing each of the goals and targets. This is currently being revised to reflect changes to ministerial and departmental functions under the current Government. The enhanced format will include additional information on related stakeholder forums linked to each target. It will be published on *gov.ie* in the coming weeks.

The Central Statistics Office, CSO, working in conjunction with Ordnance Survey Ireland, has developed an online GeoHive data hub to provide spatially relevant information on our progress toward targets under the SDGs. As part of this initiative, the CSO is publishing a series of individual SDG goal reports. Goals 1 to 5 are available online and goal 6, water, will be published in the coming weeks. My Department will lead the development of Ireland's second SDG national implementation plan to further guide implementation and promote awareness of the goals.

It is important to emphasise that meeting Ireland's commitments under the SDGs will entail

ambition across Government and wider society. For this reason, I intend to continue the established SDG governance arrangements of a senior officials group, chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach, supported by the interdepartmental working group, chaired by my Department. These governance arrangements are, of course, complemented by the valuable work of the SDG stakeholder forum, as well as sectoral engagement initiatives, which not only support the more coherent implementation of the goals to address environmental, social and economic challenges related to sustainable development, but also provide an essential interface between the public bodies and civil society in our collective work to deliver the SDGs in Ireland over the next decade.

I thank the Deputy for his interest in this area. I am interested to see how we can deliver it at local as well as a national level across the country. I know we were talking recently about the opportunity for Waterford to become the best example of a sustainable city in our country. I believe that is achievable with good leadership at a local level.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank the Minister. To give him his due, I know that the information in this year's report pre-dates our participation in government. We may not have our knees under the table for long but I would say that this reply sounds like business as usual, as if we are doing grand. Unfortunately the figures show that we are not doing grand, especially with environmental and sustainable development goals. We are ranking dead last. I want to see a step change in how we implement the SDGs. We should take them seriously and drive that agenda forward. I know the senior officials group met last week but that was its first meeting since November 2019. If we are serious about driving this agenda forward, we need to ensure that the meetings are more regular, or quarterly, as they are supposed to be.

I have three suggestions to make about driving this agenda forward. I know that there is work on well-being indicators. Iceland aligned its well-being indicators closely with the SDGs to make sure that the reporting happened in a transparent but meaningful way. I would like to see the SDGs reflected in the well-being indicators that are being developed by the Government. There is a programme for Government commitment about social dialogue. It has serious potential to be a framework for a whole-of-society discussion about the level of transformative change that we need in climate, in our society and in attaining Agenda 2030. With due respect to the work happening in the Department but recognising the cross-cutting nature of the sustainable development goals, I contend that this should not belong in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications but in the Department of the Taoiseach, with proper oversight of the cross-cutting nature of the goals. Will the Minister comment on that?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is true. The response I delivered is, if I may say so, a kind of departmental presentation as to what the system is doing, which I believe is what was requested. I agree with the Deputy; we need to be more ambitious, heed that report from Social Justice Ireland and realise that we are not doing enough to meet the environmental goals in particular. We have to go further and to be far more radical. I commit to delivering on those goals as best I can.

I will give some examples of areas in which we are starting to ramp up and show real leadership which might encourage the Deputy. We are only at the public consultation stage at present but the introduction of a nationwide ban on smoky fuels, which will improve air quality, is an example of Government delivering an environmental benefit that will also deliver significant health benefits. It is something we can do. Earlier today, in answer to a question on promised legislation, I referred to the work the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, is doing with regard to the roll-out of less intensive farming systems and opening up the organics scheme in order

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to radically increase the number of farmers who are paid well for their produce while being engaged in the restoration and protection of nature and developing high-quality food.

I would also refer to the work being done to develop marine protected areas. Again, we are only at the consultation stage, but we are going to deliver on this. Our sea area is ten times larger than our land area. We have a responsibility to protect nature there with real ambition and to do what the great ecologist E. O. Wilson recommends, which is to set aside large areas of the natural world for the protection and restoration of nature. A further example within my own Department is our really ambitious 200-action plan for a new circular economy. This will take the advice of yesterday's Social Justice Ireland report with regard to phasing out single-use plastics. We have also done real work in the area of just transition. We are investing in the re-wetting of our bogs to create jobs. The Deputy is absolutely right; this Government has started developing a new well-being index, which is a key part of this transition. We also recognise that, as the Deputy says, it is in the likes of the Department of Finance as well as in the Department of Taoiseach that this must be centred. I believe that is happening.

We are only at the start but the Deputy is right; let us be held to account. If we cannot improve on our delivery on those 17 goals, we will have failed in our mission. That is our manifesto. It is for all parties in this House. It is to provide us with a better future and I believe we can do that.

### **Wastewater Treatment**

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I want to talk to the Minister of State about the wastewater treatment plant in Arklow. This is absolutely critical infrastructure not only for Arklow and County Wicklow, but for the country. As the Minister of State will be aware, the Avoca river has significant issues with pollution as a result of mismanagement and a lack of infrastructure within the Arklow area. This project has been in planning for years and years. Residents have been waiting for it and are very eager to see progress being made. Businesses are also waiting for something to happen. The whole town is waiting for this project to get moving.

Irish Water has been working on it and the plans are in place but it is now sitting on the Minister's desk. In late 2020, the proposal was submitted to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It is now awaiting ministerial consent. It is important that this project be developed as quickly as possible. Arklow has great potential but this potential is being restricted by the fact that this infrastructure is not in place. I refer to potential from a tourism perspective, a business and economic perspective and a housing perspective. Arklow is really on hiatus waiting for this project to happen. From an environmental perspective, fines are potentially coming down the road if this work is not done.

My question is very simple. What progress is being made in respect of the wastewater treatment plant? Will the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage expedite this matter because, as I have said, it has been on his desk since late 2020, three months ago? This is an important project and we need to focus on it. My third question relates to funding. I want to make sure that funding is in place and that this project can start as quickly as possible because the contract cannot be allocated until this funding is signed off on.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Her points on human health,

business and the development of Arklow are well-raised. It also involves an area of mutual interest to me and the Deputy, the area of nature, biodiversity and the environment. There is no doubt that this project must be expedited.

Since January 2014, Irish Water has had statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects is a matter for determination by Irish Water.

As part of budget 2021, funding of more than €1.4 billion was secured to support water services. This includes €1.3 billion in respect of domestic water services provision by Irish Water. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area.

Arklow has been identified by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, as an area where wastewater is discharged into the Avoca river without any treatment. This practice of discharging untreated wastewater into the river is no longer acceptable. Irish Water is working to address this historical issue, in partnership with Wicklow County Council, through the provision of a new wastewater treatment plant in Arklow. This will bring benefits to the town and surrounding areas in terms of health, environmental protection and improved water quality for all.

The Arklow wastewater treatment plant must be delivered in a way that not only meets the required legislative standards but that also ensures that all works are undertaken in a safe and environmentally responsible manner, in co-operation with the local community. Under the Water Services Act 2013, Irish Water is required, as the Deputy said, to seek the consent of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, given with the approval of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, to enter into capital commitments. Irish Water must seek ministerial consent prior to entering into any individual capital commitment of a value in excess of €20 million. This is a financial control and not an issue of project consent.

In the context of the updated public spending code for evaluating, planning and managing public investment in the project as it proceeds through its life cycle, consideration is also being given to the appropriate application of the code having regard to the current life cycle stage of the project.

I assure the Deputy that the capital commitment consent request is currently under active consideration. However, given the significant investment by the taxpayer, this does involve close scrutiny by my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. In addition, NewERA carries out an in-depth review of the request on behalf of Ministers to help inform the decision. I also understand that some further inputs into the review process are awaited from Irish Water. However, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, hopes to be in a position to provide a timely decision to support Irish Water in its delivery of the project once all scrutiny is complete.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I was hoping for a commitment that this would be fast-tracked. It is a really important project. I understand that all the checks and balances have to be in place and that it is a very large project but, because of its importance, it would be really good to see it prioritised and for it to be ensured that it happens as quickly as possible. An indication of the timeline would also be really good. The proposal at the moment is for Irish Water to finish this

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project in 2024 or 2025 but there have been delays in the process all the way along. We want to prevent any further slippage and, rather than have slippage, for the whole thing to be expedited so that it can be done as quickly as possible. I know this requires ministerial consent but does it need to go to Cabinet? Is the project of such a significant size that it needs Cabinet approval? If that is the case, when does the Minister of State envisage it going to Cabinet?

Initially, it seemed funding of approximately €30 million was required but lately there have been reports that in excess of €100 million may be required. Is the Minister of State aware of any increase in costs and whether this could potentially impact on the delivery of this project because, to be honest, we cannot allow anything to impact this project? As I said, Arklow has waited for this for 20 years. The town cannot wait any longer. The river, biodiversity and the environment cannot wait any longer either. My fear is that, if progress slows any further, too much damage will be incurred. Will the Government expedite and prioritise this project? Is the money available and can the Minister of State outline the timeline for completion?

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I will revert to the Deputy with a written response on the two specific items she raises. It may well be the case that additional costs are involved at this stage, given the delays to the project but I will provide a written response on that. It is important to note that we will enter into a new cycle of river basin management plans and projects similar to this one must be expedited to improve our water quality status, which deteriorated during the previous plan period. We are all very conscious of that fact.

Plans for the delivery of the Arklow wastewater plant are at an advanced stage. Irish Water has secured the necessary planning, land and licences and the procurement of the construction contract is in the final stage. I am acutely aware of the need to progress the plant to stop the practice of discharging untreated wastewater into the Avoca river, provide a wastewater treatment facility that will comply with all relevant legislative requirements and service the population of Arklow well into the future and improve water quality in the river.

Irish Water expects construction work to begin in the second half of 2021. Together with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is expediting consideration of the capital commitment consent for a timely decision to support Irish Water's plans to commence construction. I hope this is of some assurance to the Deputy.

## Covid-19 Tests

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I thank the Minister of State for attending to address this important issue. I am glad that this has been selected as a Topical Issue matter and thank the Minister of State for taking the time to respond. I have been raising this issue for a number of months and am keen to hear about the Government's plans or intentions for the roll-out of rapid antigen testing.

The WHO and the European Commission recommend rapid antigen testing that meets the minimum performance requirements of greater than 80% sensitivity and 97% specificity. A number of rapid antigen testing products currently in use in this country far exceed these requirements, including the Roche and Abbott tests. Rapid antigen testing should be administered by trained professionals. Indeed, the nasopharyngeal sampling requires it. The rapid tests could be conducted on-site, in pharmacies or in local health centres. Results can be uploaded to

the Health Passport Europe platform, which can be used for receiving and displaying Covid-19 status and certification. This technology exists and is being used in the corporate sector by many pharmaceutical companies and multinationals as well as in the food processing sector and the construction industry. This rapid testing technology is being used at the national children's hospital construction site, for example. I have been informed that the screening taking place in some of the businesses and building sites I have mentioned has detected Covid positive cases before they entered the workplace. I have been told that four Covid positive workers were detected recently at the site of the national children's hospital. Rapid antigen testing was key to identifying these cases early and subsequently isolating those affected. This meant there were no knock-on consequences for that site.

Rapid antigen testing can complement the PCR testing in use. It is not intended to replace PCR testing but can play a pivotal role in screening and detecting Covid positive cases. It can also give hope to certain sectors that business can reopen and hope to individuals that they can attend necessary appointments and spend time with their loved ones. Rapid testing can also provide protection for people in the workplace. It can help to protect our front-line staff as they deal with the wider public in the context of appointments, surgery and medical emergencies. I reiterate that this is not a panacea for all of our Covid-related problems but it will complement the PCR testing we are already doing. I urge the Minister of State to relay my arguments to the Minister for Health and the Government. Health screening can give our country greater confidence and some reassurance that there is a way out of our current situation. The investment required to do this could be minimal. Many companies are doing this screening themselves anyway and are leading on it. It is time for the Government to consider it as a tool to strengthen the measures being undertaken, including vaccinations and quarantining.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly. Testing and contact tracing continues to be fundamental to our response to the pandemic. It is critical to ensuring that we can identify and contain the spread of the virus.

The HSE has adopted RT-PCR as the gold standard test for diagnosing Covid-19 cases. This is the most reliable test that we have available for this purpose. In addition, appropriately validated antigen diagnostic tests are now being deployed by the HSE as a supplement to PCR testing, just as suggested by the Deputy. These tests are being used for specific indications in acute hospital settings and as part of the response to outbreaks in the community setting, particularly in symptomatic vulnerable populations and for their close contacts. Antigen detection tests, ADTs, are described as rapid and simple to perform. The validation work that has been done by the HSE and across Europe to date indicates that ADTs are most effective in detection of symptomatic cases, when symptom onset is within the past five days and when the likelihood of test positivity is greater than 10% among the target population. The validation studies available show significant disparities in test performance as against some manufacturer's claims. Many of the tests available do not meet the minimum performance requirements set by the WHO and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, although that is a general finding and does not relate to the specific tests referred to by the Deputy. This means that the tests currently available are of limited use in most circumstances when testing asymptomatic populations. It is also clear that new tests and new technologies are becoming available every day.

Considerable work has been undertaken to date to evaluate the use of ADTs in an Irish context. While antigen testing will not replace the requirement for large scale RT-PCR testing for public health purposes, validation of tests is continuing in the HSE due to the potential role

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that ADTs have in our national testing strategy. Consideration is also being given to the use of antigen tests in asymptomatic community populations. Professor Mark Ferguson, the Government's chief scientific adviser, has been asked by the Minister for Health to set up a group to examine the use of antigen tests in the community and more expert advice is expected shortly to inform us further on the potential of these testing technologies. While we now have more tools at our disposal, it is clear that we need to deploy existing tests appropriately and be guided by scientific evidence in doing so, particularly since we are aware of the limitations of many of the tests available.

I reassure the House that the national testing policy is kept under review and we will use whatever tools are appropriate to fight Covid-19. I hope that addresses some of the Deputy's queries.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I welcome the fact that Professor Mark Ferguson has been asked to keep this under review. However, we need to have a bit of ambition. The two tests I mentioned from Roche and Abbott meet the minimum standards set by the WHO. If we are to give people hope of the prospect of work post Covid or even as the vaccination programme is carried out, this is pivotal. In addition, if people have medical or dental appointments, an antigen test half an hour before they arrive could provide a lot of reassurance, not just for the patient but also for the staff at medical and dental clinics. I welcome the fact that Professor Ferguson is keeping it under review but believe that we need to do more, especially in the context of the vaccine roll-out. It is a fluid situation and there might be more speed bumps down the line with the roll-out of the programme. This would give people light at the end of the tunnel and some hope regarding the prospect of returning to some semblance of normality. I emphasise again that I am not talking about replacing PCR testing but complementing it. The more people we test, whether it is through PCR or rapid antigen testing, the better.

I draw the Minister of State's attention to the example of Liverpool, where daily rapid antigen testing was carried out in the city recently.

*6 o'clock*

More than 200,000 people in the city were tested out of a population of 500,000. Of those 200,000 rapid tests conducted, some 4,000 people were found to be asymptomatic and carrying the virus unbeknownst to themselves. The rapid tests rolled out in Liverpool daily enabled those people to be identified and to isolate themselves.

I reiterate that the intention is not to use antigen testing to replace the system we have. As the Minister of State said, PCR testing is the gold standard. I believe there is a place for rapid testing as well, however. The HSE could publish guidelines for this type of rapid testing and then allow companies to provide this type of test to people, because there is a demand for them. This type of testing is already being undertaken all around us, such as in major pharmaceutical companies and other multinationals, for example, and it is about time that we moved with this trend.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. It is interesting that we are having this conversation today, because only last week I met Paul Reid and Dr. Colm Henry regarding this matter. The week before, the Minister of Health and I also had a long conversation on this issue. Rapid antigen testing is a complementary tool, and as the vaccination programme is being rolled out it is imperative that we have backup alternatives available as

we reopen society. It would give people the hope that Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan spoke about.

When reopening society, we must also consider locations such as student campuses. We must have an option we can use in those contexts and that is where rapid antigen testing can have a role. I compliment the Minister on the appointment of Professor Mark Ferguson, who has been tasked with reviewing this matter. One aspect of the roll-out of the vaccination programme is relevant to this context, namely, how the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, has responded with its re-examination of those groupings assigned priority. Such a reassessment is exactly what is happening with rapid antigen testing.

The question now is how we can best use the tools available to us to ensure we can continue to function as a society when the vaccination process starts. We should not only give hope when we start to open up, but also an assurance that we will be able to respond to any situation which might develop, do the required tests and lockdown affected sectors. One sector that comes to mind where that could be done is in meat plants. The same kind of rapid antigen testing could be done in small communities where one or two cases might pop up. A review of the roll-out of rapid antigen testing is therefore at the forefront of the Minister's ambition in this context as well.

## **Health Services**

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the opportunity to address this issue with the Minister of State. It has been the case for many years in Laois-Offaly that there have been long waiting lists for services such as child psychology, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. However, the situation is now truly awful and this is not all due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Action is needed now to deal with the backlog of children in these two counties who have been waiting for several years to access these services. It is a scandal that 4,771 children are waiting for services in these three specialties. What is worse is that some of those children, 2,650 of them to be accurate, have been waiting for more than one year to be given an appointment for assessment or appropriate therapy. The damage being done to children who may have autism spectrum disorder, ASD, or some other condition is immeasurable. The Minister of State understands that.

Some 2,014 children are on the waiting list for occupational therapy, with 1,181 of those children waiting for more than 12 months. In the area of child psychology, 1,304 children are on the waiting list, 801 of whom have been waiting for more than a year. There are 1,453 children in the queue for speech and language services, with 568 of those children waiting for longer than 12 months. These are the latest figures I obtained through parliamentary questions and they are shocking. Does the Government understand this situation is storing up massive problems for the future? I say this sincerely to the Minister of State. If appropriate interventions and services are not provided at an early stage in a child's development, more difficulties and more complex issues will arise in adulthood. I am not an expert in these areas, but all those who are experts have told me that over the years.

Aside from the difficulties being caused to children, these waiting lists are also causing great stress and many problems for parents and families. They have been watching their children regressing and have then had to deal with the resultant behavioural issues and cope with all that entails. Teachers are trying to deal and cope with challenges and problems being caused in school classrooms. The community and society in general will also face issues in this regard

in future. It is important therefore that we try to rectify this situation. The Covid-19 pandemic does not explain away the existing backlog and the poor state of child services in Laois-Offaly. This area appears to have been a blackspot in this regard for many years. The provision of these services in Laois-Offaly has been poor for as long as I have been around. I was raising this issue some 20 years ago as a county councillor, but these services are in crisis now.

Action is needed. I have raised this situation year after year, and sometimes several times each year. I have raised it with the management of the HSE and with successive Ministers. The real issue here concerns the provision of services where they are needed, which is on the front line. It is crucially important that these services are in place. We should not look at the situation from a financial perspective, but there will be major economic consequences down the line. The human aspect, however, is the most important. I refer to the effects on the children themselves and the problems we are storing up for those children in adulthood, as well as the effects on their families, in classrooms and on the wider community. I ask the Minister of State to address this issue.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue for discussion. I think this is the third time I have come into the House to answer a Topical Issue matter regarding the Laois-Offaly area. I am thankful that Deputies Fleming and Cowen do not seek responses from me as well, or I would be in here every couple of weeks answering these questions.

The Government does understand this situation. I know all too well the difficulties families are facing in securing access to some disability services. That is why in preparation for tonight's answer I have tried to get to the exact root of the issue raised by Deputy Stanley. This has been a priority issue for me since being appointed in July and many parents have contacted my office to voice their concerns, which are particularly acute during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Turning to the situation in Laois-Offaly specifically, this is an area of which I was already aware. I have discussed this matter with the HSE previously, as there appear to be several challenges in the community healthcare organisation, CHO, and these most certainly must be addressed. Deputy Stanley is correct concerning early intervention being key. I have been told by the HSE that the lengthy waiting times for children to access Laois-Offaly disability services are primarily due to two issues which the HSE is struggling with and which we must rectify.

The first of these is the high volume of referrals to the services. I have been told by the HSE that local disability services are constantly striving to maximise resources and ensure that the maximum quantity of services is being provided to children. The HSE's Midlands Louth Meath CHO disability services are also facing and tackling several recruitment issues, which I hope will make a big difference to the waiting times that families are experiencing. The aim is to recruit staff to fill all vacant psychology posts as soon as possible, but the recruitment of staff grade clinical psychologists is dependent on the number of clinical psychologists graduating this year.

There are two vacant occupational therapy posts in Laois-Offaly children's disability services and every effort is being made by the local HSE to fill these posts as quickly as possible. Two speech and language therapy posts are vacant in Laois as a consequence of maternity leave, with one person due to return this month. In addition, there is one permanent vacancy and this post is due to be filled next month. In more positive news, the Deputy will be glad to hear that three posts which had been vacant were filled within the past month. As the Deputy may be aware, I secured funding for an additional 100 new therapy posts in the recent budget

and I hope to see some of these posts allocated to the Laois-Offaly area in due course.

It is also important to inform Deputy Stanley that I met with CORU last week, which is the organisation responsible for recognising and validating the qualifications of those people who may have returned from overseas and granting them a place on the professional registers. I am working with CORU to ensure that task is undertaken speedily and I have been told that the turnaround time for physiotherapists is now down to 69 days. I am also pleased to note the Trojan work ongoing across all CHOs to clear the assessment of need backlog. I meet all disability managers every month to monitor the progress being made on clearing the backlog. I am happy to report that in CHO 8, specifically in Laois-Offaly, the backlog fell from 410 in September 2020 to 100 at the end of January 2021, a 75% drop in five months, which the Deputy must agree is phenomenal progress. The important offshoot of this progress is that it will ensure that as the backlog becomes less of an issue, therapists should be better able to focus on the delivery of interventions, which is what children need most.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** In the ten years I have been raising this issue, this is the first time that I have had some hope. It seems that, as the Minister of State outlined, the Department has intervened and that she has taken it up with the HSE. Sometimes we raise such issues in the House and express our concern and so on, but we do not get firm answers. The Minister of State, however, has outlined some reasons for hope in respect of recruitment to the disability services. She referred to the recruitment of clinical psychologists and stated that every effort is being made to fill the vacant occupational therapist posts, something I will come back to in a moment. She went on to state that speech and language posts that are vacant as a consequence of maternity leave are being addressed, and that is positive. There is some hope to be found in the announcement of 100 additional therapist posts in the recent budget, as well as in the effort to recruit practitioners who are returning from overseas. That is excellent.

There is a difficulty with recruitment that I wish to raise, although I do not know the exact ins and outs of it. I have been told there is a problem with people applying for these positions because sometimes they are offered only six-month or 12-month contracts and people do not find them attractive enough to apply for. We need to offer people full-time positions whereby those who get through a 12-month probationary period will be over the line and will have a permanent job.

I always get the impression that the HSE is very top-heavy. The Minister of State outlined some progress on trying to fill the gaps on the front line, which is really important. I encourage her to accelerate that and to examine the terms of the contracts being offered. Is the length of such contracts an issue and if so, can the Minister of State have that addressed in an effort to drive it on? It is a severe disappointment to me. It is one of the issues that I prioritised when I was first elected to the House ten years ago. I came to this debate with a heavy heart. I thought I was in here again raising this issue and would probably go home with no progress. The Minister of State has outlined some progress that has been made and I hope that is the case. She should keep her foot on the pedal and drive it on. She has our full support in that regard. She might comment on the issue of contracts and how they might be made more attractive.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I agree with Deputy Stanley in respect of contracts. It is often a fear that short-term contracts are intended only to bridge the gap for six or 12 months. The HSE will this year recruit approximately 16,000 people throughout the sector, including 100 therapist posts coming to my Department. They are all full-time, permanent positions that will be spread across all nine CHOs. There also will be recruitment to primary care, which also pro-

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vides occupational and speech and language therapists. Furthermore, in the school inclusions model, there is a pilot for two CHOs that is yet to be announced, where there will be a further 100 therapist posts to focus specifically on the likes of speech and language therapy. There will, therefore, be a real bolstering of supports. All the positions to which I refer are full-time, permanent positions.

As the Deputy is aware, when the HSE is involved it is a long and drawn-out process but I hope matters can be expedited. Many people have returned home and have expressed an interest to CORU. I would like CORU to turn around their applications swiftly in respect of the vacancies that exist in order that we can capture the talent that has returned and ensure that those people will work at home and locally, and that the investment that was put in by their families through the years will be rewarded by having them working for us, because we have the best of talent. In fairness to the CHO that has provided assessments of needs in the Deputy's area for four months, it has worked tirelessly. Based on the figures I outlined earlier, it must be complimented. When the backlog is cleared, more therapists will be available and that will be complemented by recruitment. As a result, I hope I will not have to appear before the House on the matter for a few months to come.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

The Dáil adjourned at 6.16 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 3 March 2021.