



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 11 Bealtaine 2021

Tuesday, 11 May 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: At the weekend, the Taoiseach stated that housing is the number one crisis facing young people. This morning, a report published by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has highlighted again the crushing cost of housing, including extortionate rents, which far exceed their pre-crash heights, as well as a collapse in homeownership amongst this generation of young adults.

It is not lost on these young people, their parents or their grandparents that the housing crisis was created by Fianna Fáil, which left the housing market in hock to developers and deepened by Fine Gael, which could not wait to let the vulture funds loose. The result of all of this is that those looking to put a secure and affordable roof over their heads do not stand a chance.

At a time when the Government should be moving heaven and earth to do everything possible to make housing affordable again, what is the Government doing? It is still enabling and encouraging wealthy investment funds to buy up family homes with cushy tax deals. The Government claims that this is a new phenomenon or an unintended consequence but that is not true. In 2019, six out of ten new homes in Dublin were taken off the market and the vast majority were sold to the investment funds. In the past four weeks, 400 houses have been snapped up by these funds.

Moreover, they are not stopping with Dublin; their plan is now to spread their wings across the State. These investment funds are now moving to Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway, with leading developers saying that they will be selling more than 40% of their new homes to these funds in the years ahead. It is a very daunting prospect for young people who scrimp and save and make enormous sacrifices to put themselves in the position, if they are lucky, to have a deposit to buy a home. Yet, these investment funds not only rob people of the chance to buy their own homes but also push up house prices, in some cases by as much as €80,000.

All of this happens against the backdrop of the publication of the utterly discredited Affordable Housing Bill 2021 by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy

Darragh O'Brien, and the provision of an affordable housing plan that can make houses even more expensive. Even by the Government's standards, that is some achievement. Is it any wonder then, that the mood of a generation is one of exasperation? The Government's sweetheart tax arrangements allow these investors to lock people out of homeownership and force them into the private rental market, where these same funds then charge extortionate levels of rent. Heads, they win; tails, they win; it is a win-win for the investment funds.

There are things the Government could do right now to make housing more affordable. It could double the State's capital investment in affordable and social housing. We in Sinn Féin have called for that action to be taken and the ESRI has echoed that call. The Government could cut the legs from the vulture funds by doing that. It could cut rents and put a month's rent back into the pocket of every renter through a tax refund. It could legislate to prevent any further rent increases. Above all, what it could do is legislate to end the sweetheart tax deals and remove the financial incentive and advantage accruing to these investment funds. However, it has done none of those things. The Cabinet met today. People are waiting to hear from the Government. What are its plans to stop these vulture funds?

The Taoiseach: First, I have to say that the Government is ten months in office. During those ten months, we have been dealing with an unprecedented global pandemic which has had a huge impact on the people and, indeed, on sectors of our economy. It has also had an impact on the construction industry. Notwithstanding that, the Government has committed to, and provided the funding for, the largest multi-annual social housing programme in the history of the State. That is the core of the Government's policy programme. A total of €3.3 billion is allocated this year to new house construction. We want to build 9,500 new social homes. The State and Government are also getting involved in building, and supporting the building of, affordable homes through a variety of schemes. The Government has initiated the first national cost-rental scheme, which will provide houses at rents 25% below the market price.

I have said, and I have made it clear to my Government colleagues - along with the leaders of the other parties in government - that we are committed to ensuring that housing is our number one, collective responsibility as we emerge from Covid-19 in order to give young people an opportunity for home ownership. That is something I am passionately committed to and that we provide enough social housing for those who need it. In addition to the allocation and funding we are putting in for housing, we are making sure that unprecedented amounts of funding are going to infrastructure to make sure the houses can happen, in terms of the allocation of money to Irish Water to make sure we can get water services in place for these housing developments, and also wider infrastructural developments such as the docklands in Cork or the development in Galway and Limerick that will facilitate more residential units being built and more housing being built.

That is the story of this Government's programme for housing and no amount of distortion will change those facts. We remain committed to that but we have to do more. Development finance for builders is problematic in this country. It has been problematic for quite a number of years in terms of the cost of funding for builders to get going and build housing estates. We need builders to build large housing estates and also to build smaller housing estates and smaller housing units. The fundamental issue at stake in housing is supply, supply, supply. That is it. That is why there is an onus and responsibility on all politicians of all parties to do everything we possibly can to support the supply of housing. That is why Deputy McDonald's party also has questions to answer in terms of the serial objections to quite substantial housing programmes and projects that have been voted down on too many occasions, whether it be in

Tallaght, where her party voted down 500 houses that could have been built, or in Clondalkin, where 800 to 900 houses, again, were opposed. That cannot go on. Maybe it is in the Deputy's interest to frustrate the attempts to get housing built or to impede progress. The biggest actor in housing right now, the biggest player, is this Government, through a whole range of vehicles and schemes.

In respect of the investment funds that came into the country more than eight or nine years ago, we are very clear that we are opposed to investment funds taking over or buying estates that have already been built. The original purpose and objective of them was to add to supply, not to take over existing supply and compete with first-time buyers or, indeed, approved housing bodies or councils for that matter. Our priority remains the first-time buyer. We want home ownership to increase.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin has opposed every single measure that this Government has taken to provide affordable housing to people and it did likewise in previous years.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The welcome mat was laid out for these investment funds long before Covid-19 was ever heard of. The Taoiseach should not try to hide behind the pandemic as an excuse for his evident failures. The evidence of the Government's failures are everywhere to be seen. The Taoiseach recognises that we are in a crisis and it is about supply. Supply needs to be met by building public housing on public lands. The day and time of the developer, the vulture fund and the private investment fund being king must end. That is a journey the Taoiseach has yet to walk.

I have asked the Taoiseach what he intends to do now about these investment funds. These funds are, as we speak, snapping up family homes under the noses of first-time buyers and other buyers seeking a secure, affordable roof over their heads. They are driving up the cost of housing by as much as €80,000 in some instances. I have asked the Taoiseach a direct question, which I will put again. The Government has sweetheart tax arrangements with these investment funds in respect of corporation tax, capital gains tax and stamp duty. When will that end? Where is the Government's plan to rein in these funds? When will we see it?

The Taoiseach: The Government has this year committed to 12,750 new social homes, 9,500 of which will be direct builds. That is a commitment that the Deputy continues to ignore. That is at maximum and it was before the three months of Covid-19 restrictions on the construction industry came in. That is the point.

I note the Deputy's reply. Is she saying that private builders have no role at all?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I did not say that.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy seemed to be saying that. I have no idea what her view is of private house building.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is the Taoiseach doing about investment funds?

The Taoiseach: I do not know whether the Deputy thinks small builders should be facilitated to build homes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is the Taoiseach doing about investment funds?

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Taoiseach without interruption.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin seems to be objecting to housing project after housing project for a variety of reasons, perhaps just to mess up the whole thing and prevent success. In terms of the investment funds-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me assure the Taoiseach, the Government is messing it up without any assistance from me.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: -----the Ministers for Finance and Housing, Local Government and Heritage are going to deal with the issue and will be bringing proposals to the Government in respect of the situation.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When?

The Taoiseach: We do not want investment funds competing with first-time buyers and certainly not buying up housing estates. We oppose that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: He does not oppose that; he enables it.

The Taoiseach: As I have said, in previous eras the banks provided finance to the construction industry. The Government is now providing the bulk of housing activity through its funding mechanisms, be they direct build, affordable housing schemes, cost rental or other mechanisms such as the housing assistance payment, HAP, and so on. That is the reality of the situation.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I have a specific housing issue to raise with the Taoiseach. The High Court yesterday quashed a decision of An Bord Pleanála yet again. The board had granted permission for 123 apartments at a site on the Old Fort Road in Ballincollig. That is a place I know well and I am sure the Taoiseach also knows it well. This is not an isolated judgment. Month after month, the courts are striking down decisions of An Bord Pleanála, particularly planning decisions taken under strategic housing provisions of the 2016 Act brought in by the Taoiseach's constituency colleague, the Minister, Deputy Coveney. Last December, the High Court quashed a permission that An Bord Pleanála had granted for more than 660 homes in Rathmullan in Donegal. In other cases, An Bord Pleanála is simply holding up its hands. In March of this year, it consented to a High Court order quashing its permission for 614 residential units on RTÉ lands at Donnybrook. In July 2019, permission for 221 housing units at Cross Avenue in Blackrock, County Dublin, was dismissed because An Bord Pleanála had not gone through enough public participation, a basic requirement of planning law.

To be clear, the Labour Party is very supportive of An Bord Pleanála, its structure and use, and the need for it. I do not think any party in this State has a stronger history than the Labour Party when it comes to having independent planning regulatory processes in place. We have paid the price and taken lawsuits for that down the years. There is an issue here, however. In its annual report for 2019, An Bord Pleanála refers to 17 judgments in the courts. The board was only successful in having its decisions upheld in nine cases. Its decisions were overturned in eight cases, and in seven other cases, it accepted there was a legal deficit in its decision process. That means 15 out of 24 cases were, therefore, lost. How many units are lost because of that? Given the crisis we are in, it is not good enough.

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In 2015, I established a review group, chaired by Mr. Gregory Jones QC, to undertake an independent organisational review of An Bord Pleanála, which produced an excellent report comprising 101 recommendations over 257 pages.

Does the Taoiseach accept that the frequency and regularity of successful court challenges to strategic housing developments demonstrate a fundamental problem with either the proper functioning of An Bord Pleanála or a serious deficit in the 2016 legislation or both and-or a lack of resources in the board, which the board stated is the case in its recent national development plan, NDP, submission? Will the Taoiseach ensure that the implementation of all the recommendations of the An Bord Pleanála review group is prioritised, given that it is now five years since the report, which I dare say he supported, came in?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has raised a very important issue. I take on board the points he has made. It is a cause for concern that quite a high number of those judgments were overturned or that seven were voluntarily owned up to and deficits were acknowledged in terms of the decisions. In the first instance, this means An Bord Pleanála must reflect on its process and due diligence regarding decisions that are taken, which subsequently do not stand up in the courts process.

It also speaks to a wider issue in respect of the planning process more generally and whether we need to reform that process. The idea of a planning court has been mooted with a view to making sure we can get decisions that give greater certainty to all concerned, both those who appeal and those who are appealed against. That could mean a more streamlined, efficient and effective planning system. These are projects that are being held back and houses or apartment blocks that could be built. That is not optimal or acceptable either. Many investment decisions have been held back for far too long now in the system. Our system is not optimal in terms of the future of our economy and in facilitating good investment. In some instances, it takes far too long and then, as the Deputy noted, deficiencies arise at the eleventh hour, which perhaps should have been spotted much earlier and should never have got to the stage of a High Court or Supreme Court case before they were highlighted.

I have discussed this with the Attorney General and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and we are examining proposals. I will certainly revert to that review commissioned by the Deputy five years ago. I have no intention of hanging around on this, however. The Government must move on this within a reasonable timeframe to improve our system through a combination of legislative amendments and additional resources.

Deputy Alan Kelly: There is a fundamental issue here. The 2019 report by An Bord Pleanála outlined that eight cases were lost and that in seven cases, it owned up. The figures stand for themselves. We have a fundamental issue here and three things are happening. An Bord Pleanála does not have enough resources, which I believe to be true. That is what the report stated and what the board has been saying in recent weeks with regard to the NDP.

Second, the legislation from 2016, which was brought in by the then Minister with responsibility for housing, Deputy Coveney, actually has issues with it. Third, there is an issue in respect of the process by which it makes these decisions. As the Taoiseach said, deficiencies are highlighted at the final hour and then applications are dismissed. These three problems need to be dealt with.

Finally, the Taoiseach often asks for constructive suggestions from the Opposition. We have

legal advice that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage can direct local authorities to ensure that, with any granted permission, a large percentage of the housing must be given to owner-occupiers. Will the Taoiseach either instruct or ask his Minister to consider that because it is a valid suggestion?

The Taoiseach: I do not have to direct my Minister in that regard because he is actively considering it. That is one of the range of ideas he is considering in the context of dealing with the investment funds issue, particularly in how it impacts on first-time buyers and suburban estates.

I do not disagree with the Deputy's analysis in respect of the deficiencies within the strategic development zone, SDZ, legislative framework or An Bord Pleanála's set of processes, along with the issue of resources. Suffice to say, we intend to tackle those issues. The SDZ legislation is due to expire-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: There are going to be a lot more applications before it does.

The Taoiseach: There have been many applications that have never been followed through on as well. That is another issue. I refer to the enormous volume of applications have not been followed through in terms of actual construction or development of sites. That is something that needs focus as well.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I previously articulated the serious difficulties and challenges faced by the community of Tipperary town. The area suffers from extremely high levels of long-term unemployment. In 2016, 40% of men and 26% of women in the Tipperary east urban area were unemployed. Some 40% of the households in the town are rented, half of which are socially rented from the local authority. This points to income levels and a lack of employment opportunities. Third level attainment is approximately half the national average, pointing to social deprivation issues in early childhood, 15% of the population identifies as non-Irish national and 36% of all families with children under the age of 15 are headed by lone parents. The social deprivation index for the town is quite stark. It is categorised as very disadvantaged.

In 2018, led by March4Tipp, 5,000 people took to the streets in a massive show of community resolve and determination. This was a cry for help which resonated nationally. I, along with community groups, called for the establishment of a multi-agency task force to address the massive problems facing the community. I am glad the task force is working diligently and effectively with the co-operation and support of multiple local organisations.

The most significant socioeconomic problem facing Tipperary town is the ever-increasing heavy traffic which travels through it on a daily basis. Each week, more than 85,000 traffic movements occur through the centre of the town, stifling retail and other economic activity and choking the very life out of the town. When one adds to the mix the massive post-Brexit increases in traffic in and out of Rosslare Europort, it is apparent that the town is at breaking point. Shops and other businesses struggle to keep their doors open in an environment where shoppers cannot park or move about safely. Many businesses have, unfortunately, succumbed to the pressure and closed their doors. The commercial vacancy rate in Tipperary town, at 31%, is higher than that for towns in most other counties. Traffic on the N24 is killing the town.

The whole community rejoiced when the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, agreed with my proposal that the planned Cahir to Limerick Junction N24 project needs to be prioritised, with the section that will bypass Tipperary town being commenced and completed

as a priority. Prioritising the section around Tipperary town will deliver the best results for the long-suffering local community and in the context of the flow of goods throughout the wider region. The opportunity to make a profound and lasting difference to the future of Tipperary town is within our grasp. Will the Taoiseach deliver vital help to a very deserving town and community? It is time to give Tipperary town back to the people.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Lowry for raising this important issue. All Oireachtas Members from Tipperary are united in revitalising Tipperary town and addressing social disadvantage and deprivation there. As the Deputy said, the entire community came together publicly to demonstrate its concerns but, above all, its objectives in terms of revitalising the town and its hinterland and providing for greater social inclusion. The task force has been created. The recruitment of a dedicated project manager and the production of the collaborative town centre health check have taken place as part of the contributions by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I am interested in working with the task force and all involved in a multi-agency approach, which is key and essential.

Traffic congestion in Tipperary town is very severe. The Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, met all the local Deputies on 12 March. He agreed that there were congestion issues in the town and that there was broad support for a bypass. The Deputy is correct in identifying the Minister's preferences in terms of the review of the NDP. In that context, the Minister is keen on the option for smaller bypasses which address immediate congestion in town centres and can be delivered on a shorter timescale to support the town centres first strategy. It will need further development and consideration and it is under active consideration by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, in consultation with the Cabinet economic committee in respect of those issues.

As Deputy Lowry knows, the NDP includes the proposed N24 Cahir to Limerick Junction improvement scheme, which includes a bypass of Tipperary town. I am aware that opinions have been expressed in Tipperary County Council that a short-term relief road should be built to the south of the town in an effort to immediately relieve the congestion that exists there, rather than wait for the completion of the major scheme. These are issues we will actively consider. We understand the urgency and importance of it but also the broader picture that, where we have communities that need additional help and assistance, we should, across all Departments, go the extra mile in facilitating and doing things rather than putting them on the long finger. That is my approach to this. It is part of a wider Government initiative in which we are working on a new programme to try to help areas of significant disadvantage. This would involve all Government Departments and agencies doing extra to facilitate early alleviation of that disadvantage. The Minister for Education is also working on educational disadvantage as well.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I thank the Taoiseach and appreciate his support.

I raise also the omission of DEIS - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools - status for schools in Tipperary town, which needs to be advanced and concluded. The omission of these schools, both primary and secondary, from the DEIS programme in 2017 was wrong and an injustice. This was acknowledged when the Department of Education yielded to pressure and reviewed the circumstances of these schools. As a result, an interim package of resources was implemented across all five primary schools. This package was, thankfully, renewed last week and will remain in place until the national review is completed. What is the current status of the national review and will the new DEIS programme be published and implemented for the September term?

I also ask the Taoiseach to use his office to clear the impediment to the granting of a school meal allowance for St. Anne's Secondary School. Funding has been granted by the Department of Social Protection but has not been sanctioned or implemented by the Department of Education. I would appreciate it if the Taoiseach could assist me in resolving this issue for the school.

The Taoiseach: I will follow up on the school meals issue. I do not know how these issues keep on cropping up at the bureaucratic level. Significant funding has been provided by the Government in respect of school meals and our wish is that the money would get out there to schools.

An extensive body of work has been undertaken on the national review of the whole DEIS identification model, based on the latest school enrolment data and the data available from the 2016 census under the HP deprivation index. Quality analysis of this has been carried out by members of the DEIS team, which includes representatives of the Department of Education's statistics and social inclusion unit, the inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre. The consultation process with the stakeholders in education has commenced on the implementation of this model and work is now ongoing on the final elements of the model. That will provide the basis for the development of a DEIS resource allocation system to match resources and identified need. I have been speaking with the Minister in this regard, in terms of the broader programme, and obviously this is something we want to process as quickly as we possibly can.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Almost eight months ago now, during Leaders' Questions, I raised with the Taoiseach the concerns of, and the number of specific and critical threats facing, the agricultural merchant sector. This sector employs more than 10,000 people across rural Ireland. In many villages and towns where there are little or no employment opportunities, we are fortunate enough to have these agricultural merchants. In my constituency of Laois-Offaly, we have many agricultural merchants who provide an important source of employment for a large number of people. We are fortunate to have agricultural merchants such as John Grennan & Sons in Kilcormac and Rath and we have Midland Veterinary in areas like Tullamore, Edenderry and Portarlinton. These are towns that are badly affected by unemployment. That has been the case for decades. It is very important that our agricultural merchants sector is protected and that we do everything possible for it.

Unfortunately, a number of threats are posed to the agricultural merchants sector. One of these is an EU requirement to come into force in January whereby all veterinary medicinal products, including antiparasitic drugs, will only be dispensed on foot of veterinary prescriptions. In addition, an EU directive which allowed for the exemption and maintenance of non-prescription status in respect of some products is to be scrapped. When I raised this matter eight months ago, the Taoiseach stated that he did not want a position to develop whereby people would be rendered unemployed as a result of the application of this EU requirement. Unfortunately, we are eight months on from that commitment and the likelihood of job losses has gathered momentum.

Agricultural merchants have engaged throughout the process constructively and in good faith by means of a multisectoral forum but they are increasingly of the view that the entire consultation process was never going to do anything but deliver a predetermined departmental outcome. This is despite the fact the veterinary director of the Health Products Regulatory Authority has clearly stated that when it comes to the prescribing of antiparasitic drugs, agricultural merchants are "not the root of the problem" and that licensed merchants have made and continue to make a valuable contribution in this area. The Minister for Agriculture, Food

and the Marine and his Department have made it clear, however, that they have no intention of changing their interpretation of the regulations for prescribing antiparasitic medicines. This is despite widespread condemnation from farmers, farming organisations, horse owners, pharmacists, licensed merchants, co-operatives, MEPs and the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine.

The new regime, if allowed to be introduced, will effectively eliminate the category of “responsible person” from the list of those allowed to prescribe these medicines. This is completely unjustified. What is the Taoiseach going to do? This is going to have a serious impact on employment and on the 140,000 beef and sheep farmers who will be disproportionately affected.

The Taoiseach: As I have said, this matter relates to the transposition of an EU directive, which is an obligation on all member states of the Union. As the Deputy knows, a stakeholders’ group has been established and the Minister is engaging with it with a view to dealing with the issue of antiparasitic and antimicrobial resistance while maintaining competition in the market and keeping costs down for all concerned. There are safety and animal health protection dimensions to this as well. For example, Ireland is still the only country in Europe that does not require prescriptions for antiparasitic treatments. That is the reality.

We want to get a solution that will enable the sector to continue to provide its valuable services to farmers the length and breadth of the country. This is a very important sector in the context of employment. Across regional or rural Ireland in particular, it provides valuable employment. We are very conscious of that. We will do what has to be done in order to ensure a level playing field across this country and put in place a framework that will fulfil our obligations under the directive without imposing additional undue burdens on the businesses concerned, the sector or the farming community. A balance must be struck between animal health and safety and the safety of food for human consumption. These are important and serious issues that cannot simply be ignored. The transposition of a directive imposes obligations on a state and the Minister is working with the stakeholders’ groups to try to get a resolution to this issue prior to the deadline, which, as the Deputy says, will commence next year.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Taoiseach for his response but I want to point out that responsible persons within agricultural merchants, of whom there are 1,600, are highly skilled and agricultural merchants have invested heavily in ensuring that they have training. They are skilled people with knowledge and expertise and they are also farmers. They know their livestock and animals better than we can and do give them credit for. I am saying that not to reach a fair compromise in a constructive manner would be ignoring the voices of farming organisations such as the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, ICMSA, the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, ICSA, and our farmers and agricultural merchants, which have all voiced their opposition to this measure. They are the experts and they know how rural Ireland and farming operate.

We need to engage constructively and to reach a fair agreement and constructive solution to ensure that no job is lost because, for instance, we cannot afford to lose any jobs in the midlands. There are no jobs being created under the just transition and I raise this matter for a second time because it is so important and we need to make sure there is a fair and workable solution and that the 10,000 jobs across this State are protected.

The Taoiseach: As I said, the Minister is committed to reaching a constructive and fair

resolution of this issue that intends to try to maintain employment within the sector, as well as ensuring we can fulfil our obligations and keep costs down for all concerned, particularly those in farming who avail of such services. We understand that fully, we understand the issues and we are committed to doing that. As for the just transition, jobs are being created and will be created in the midlands from just transition in retrofitting, in the rewetting of bogs and in a number of other developments. We intend to put together a series of measures, which are already under way, to illustrate that point. It is extremely important under just transition that the funding that has been allocated is brought to fruition in the variety of projects that have received funding. Those projects must be brought to fruition quickly and create jobs on the ground.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: We have already agreed that the report of the Business Committee will be taken as read but arising from it there are three proposals to be considered by the House. Is the proposal for dealing with Tuesday's business agreed to? It is not agreed.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We have all watched with increasing alarm and disgust the events in east Jerusalem and Gaza. We are again witnessing the wholesale flouting of international law by the Israeli state. We are seeing the bombardment of Palestinian communities and tensions ratcheted high in a situation that is increasingly becoming a humanitarian and political crisis. The annexation of Palestinian lands is wrong and is against international law. The collective punishment and humiliation of the Palestinian people are wrong and the occupation of Palestinian land is wrong and against the law. It is beyond time that the international community named this, called it out and confronted Israel with real consequences for its behaviour.

We have the privileged position of sitting on the UN Security Council. I put it to the Taoiseach that we need statements in this House asserting that Ireland will stand with the rule of international law and the Palestinian people. We need statements to that effect and I hope we will have a common and united voice in that regard. We need the Government to outline how we will use this privileged position on the UN Security Council to ensure that action is taken and that the international community, which for too long has been asleep, negligent and *laissez-faire* in respect of Palestine, finally acts.

An Ceann Comhairle: For the information of the House, I have selected a Topical Issue matter on this very issue.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I want to ask the Taoiseach, as I did a number of weeks ago, about the role of An Taisce in planning. At that time, the Taoiseach suggested there were too many judicial reviews. An Taisce had taken a judicial review against the permission Glanbia had been granted by Kilkenny County Council and An Bord Pleanála, with additional licences from the Environmental Protection Agency. Now it has decided, after an overwhelming result against it in the High Court judicial review, to appeal this decision again in the courts. This is costing hundreds of jobs. There will be 100 jobs in the plant and suppliers from throughout the south east and mid-west will supply it. It will be operated by a Dutch company and Glanbia and will manufacture cheddar cheese.

An Ceann Comhairle: What does this have to do with the Order of Business?

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: I want a debate on this issue. An Taisce gets €2.5 million annually from various Government agencies and it is causing havoc in rural Ireland. Deputy Kelly asked a question about An Bord Pleanála. An Bord Pleanála sided with the application. It involves jobs and the livelihoods of young farmers are at stake. We cannot have a non-governmental organisation, an NGO, causing this kind of havoc and using taxpayers' money to destroy taxpayers.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We need a debate on it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I also believe we need statements on what is happening in Jerusalem. The particular spark for this event is the fact the Israeli authorities, prompted by settlers, are seeking to evict 28 families from the Sheikh Jarrah area of Jerusalem. It is worth saying that these people are already double refugees in that they were driven from Haifa and villages and towns throughout Palestine in 1948. Eventually, they found some home in places such as Sheikh Jarrah with the assistance of UN constructed housing. Now illegal settlers, with the assistance of the Israeli State, are trying to drive them out. Horrendous brutality is being used by the Israeli police against Palestinians who want to protest against this. It is just not acceptable. There needs to be clear statements. We also need the Government to call for actual sanctions against Israel for its horrendous treatment of the Palestinians.

Deputy Gary Gannon: On the same issue, we need to have statements on the ongoing crisis in east Jerusalem. I noted just before Leaders' Questions started that the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has called the Israeli ambassador to his office, which is often a prelude to criticism. I hope that happens and I hope it is stark and full criticism. We need statements on this matter and we need to have a full and common position whereby we can condemn to the fullest extent the atrocities that are happening in east Jerusalem.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I add my voice to the calls for statements on the situation in Israel. We see that the European Union is going along with it. Is this the position Ireland will also maintain? We have to assert our independence at the UN Security Council to add our voices to stating this is wrong and should be stopped.

An Ceann Comhairle: I emphasise that a Topical Issue matter has been selected on this issue for this evening.

The Taoiseach: These issues were not raised by the parties concerned at the meeting of the Business Committee. The Government is extremely concerned about what is happening in the Middle East, with clashes in Jerusalem and the attacks on Gaza. A number of deaths have been reported in Gaza since Monday following the launch by Israeli forces of an operation in response to rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. In eastern Jerusalem, hundreds were injured over the past three days during clashes. As has been said, the Government remains extremely concerned about the evictions of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah and other Palestinian neighbourhoods in occupied east Jerusalem. The Government raised this and participated at an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council yesterday. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has raised the issue at the Foreign Affairs Council also.

It is not a question that the EU is going along with this. That is lazy commentary which does not do justice to the European Union's commitment to the Palestinians' community in terms of funding supports, in particular, of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine

Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA. For far too long in this House, Europe has been cast in a poor light, notwithstanding the extensive supports it provides for Palestinian education, Palestinian human rights and supports.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: What is the relationship between Israel and the European Commission then?

The Taoiseach: That needs to be said. I am saying it because there is far too much of a one-sided view of everything in terms of the European Union. We are members of the European Union and we should stand up for the European Union from time to time. The Government has no issue with statements. It may be next week in terms of the facilitation of the House but we should have statements on the issue.

We also should at some stage, maybe next week, have statements on the Ballymurphy inquest. Our thoughts today are with the families of those who were killed unjustifiably in Ballymurphy on those terrible three days in August 1971. The inquest has been clear in its conclusions that all were entirely wrongly killed. All were entirely innocent. I myself toured that area as Minister for Foreign Affairs. I acknowledge the extraordinary perseverance and commitment of the families involved who have waited nearly 50 years to get some sense of justice for their loved ones. It speaks more broadly to the legacy issue more generally. This inquest and its outcome deserves to be debated in this House. Also, the Government has supported the Ballymurphy families for many years and we will continue to stand in solidarity with them. The legacy of violence in Northern Ireland remains a deep wound. We should - perhaps it might be possible early next week - have a debate or statements on that, as well as statements on the Middle East because the House has acted before collectively on the Middle East. We have issued joint statements in relation to the Middle East in the past and the Government will be supportive of such an approach.

An Ceann Comhairle: What of the An Taisce issue that Deputy Mattie McGrath raised?

The Taoiseach: My position remains clear on that issue. That project is of immense economic importance to the region and to the dairy industry and the expansion of that sector. It has gone through a lengthy process already. It has gone through the judicial process. I appeal that there be no further appeals against this project, given that the courts have ruled clearly in relation to it and that many jobs depend on it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Turn off the tap of money.

The Taoiseach: There has to be balance in terms of how we all behave in society. We cannot all be absolutist in pursuit of our own objectives to the exclusion of the well-being of others in society. The balance is being tipped in the wrong scale here completely and it will create unnecessary tensions and division.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Turn off the tap.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Turn off the money supply.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Lowry, were you trying to come in on this matter?

Deputy Michael Lowry: I was asking to get in on the same issue. I am glad that the Taoiseach understands the necessity to intervene through legislation in regard to this matter. We have a situation where we have vexatious, spurious objections deliberately obstructing and

holding up investment by Glanbia, which is impacting on the ability to create jobs, impacting on the company's ability to expand and having a detrimental consequence for the farmers who are supplying Glanbia. This needs to be resolved. It is time An Taisce was reined in. We have to do that here through changing the planning laws to make these laws less available to those who want to continue objecting.

An Ceann Comhairle: If it is satisfactory to Members, I will try and convene a meeting of the Business Committee this afternoon to see how the issues raised by Deputies can be accommodated, this week or next week, as suggested by the Taoiseach. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We will take on An Taisce then.

An Ceann Comhairle: All the issues raised by the Deputies will be considered. Are the proposals for dealing with today's business agreed to? Agreed. Are the proposals for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Not agreed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not agreed.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I object to No. 9a, a motion re financial resolution on the Private Security Services (Amendment) Bill, on Wednesday's business. This came before members of the Business Committee for answer at 10 o'clock this morning. It is shoddy treatment of the Business Committee and the Dáil that something would come up at such short notice to be agreed. The principle is wrong and for that reason, we should object to it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand that a majority of members of the Business Committee were supportive of taking the business on Wednesday. Deputy Boyd Barrett is offering.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I object to the vote on the national marine planning framework happening at all until there has been proper scrutiny of that framework by the relevant committees. This week, the Government has aroused the ire of people in the context of letting vulture funds run amok in this country and wrecking the housing sector on land. Now, exactly the same thing-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please let us not have a long debate about it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----is planned for the offshore by the same types of interests wishing to profit from Ireland's offshore with what are deemed relevant projects. It is not acceptable that this framework would be voted through until we have real and proper scrutiny of some of the investment interests that have grabbed pieces of our offshore and until proper environmental and biodiversity impact assessments are carried out.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: On the same issue, I remind the Taoiseach that when this issue was brought to his attention by the Opposition, he said that we had to move on and that it was urgent. Last week, the vote that was scheduled on this was postponed. The Government could have used that week, as the committee requested, to invite representatives of the inshore fishermen and the environmental NGOs to have their say and to try to get this planning framework right. The Government chose not to do so and it wasted a week. I just wanted to put that on the record.

Deputy Michael Collins: I fully agree with Deputy Mac Lochlainn that the Government

has wasted a whole week. The inshore fishermen of this country deserve better. Indeed, the fishermen of Ireland deserve better. They are under severe pressure and the regime that we are on the verge of bringing in for the weighing of fish is an explosive issue. We need more time set aside to debate this. I fully agree with Deputy Mac Lochlainn in that regard.

The Taoiseach: This is a subterfuge and a way for people to create their own Leader's Questions and Order of Business debate to the detriment of other representatives in the House. The issue of weighing is serious but it has absolutely nothing to do with the marine planning framework. Deputy Michael Collins uses that as an excuse-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: It is a complete abuse-----

Deputy Michael Collins: Would the Taoiseach kindly resolve the issue? There is no point in just saying that there is a serious issue in terms of weighing fish.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please allow the Taoiseach, without interruption.

Deputy Michael Collins: People in Castletownbere and Unionhall are stretched to the last. The Taoiseach was asleep at the wheel during Brexit.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should resume his seat.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan has made me aware-----

Deputy Michael Collins: There is no point in "Deputy this" and "Deputy that" if the Taoiseach cannot resolve the issue for the people of west Cork-----

The Taoiseach: I do not need Deputy Collins to tell me about it.

Deputy Michael Collins: -----and the fishermen of west Cork. The Taoiseach has been asleep at the wheel for the past 12 months.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy, resume your seat.

The Taoiseach: It is Deputy Michael Collins who has been permanently asleep at the wheel.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is Wednesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not agreed.

The Taoiseach: Can I respond to the Deputies?

An Ceann Comhairle: Respond away.

The Taoiseach: Last week we discussed the marine planning framework. A marine planning Bill has to follow that. The Government wants to move on and get things done. There are too many people on the other side of the House who want to stop everything, impede everything-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It was two weeks ago-----

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The Taoiseach: -----and prevent things from happening. It is happening in housing-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Two weeks ago.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: They are opposing every housing project that happens. Now we are talking about the marine planning framework, the first ever spatial plan for the marine, which is a good thing. It actually avoids the type of activity to which Deputy Boyd Barrett referred. That is the point. There will be many checks and balances within the spatial plan which will give an orderly and proper regulatory framework to be followed by legislation to protect rights and biodiversity while also enabling proper development within our seas that will be both timely and efficient. We should be much further ahead in the development of offshore wind energy infrastructure. Offshore wind is going to be vital in the context of renewable energy and electricity generation into the future.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: The Deputies opposite seem to just want to say “No, no, no”-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Can the Taoiseach guarantee-----

An Ceann Comhairle: One speaker, please.

The Taoiseach: -----all of the time. It is “No” to everything, as far as I can see. Every time they stand up, it is about stopping one project or another. That seems to be the bottom and consistent line. I have to put that on the record. The only motivation we have is to get certain things done in this House and to get certain things going in this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday’s business agreed to?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not agreed.

Question, “That the proposal for dealing with Wednesday’s business be agreed to,” put and declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is Thursday’s business agreed to?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is not agreed. There is still a massive delay in the granting of felling licences. I am calling for a full debate to see if we can do something to help 12,000 people remain in their jobs. This Government has completely failed us in this regard and the forestry department is not doing its duty and is not granting felling licences. I am calling for full debate to see what we can do to help these people. Is the Taoiseach aware of what is happening or not happening? This is a serious issue. The forestry industry is nearly finished. The Bill the Government pushed through in the fall of the year was no help whatever.

Deputy Seán Canney: On forestry licences, we talk about housing and everything else but we do not have timber. The price of timber is going up daily and the reason is there is a shortage because there are not enough staff in the Department to deal with the issue. I plead with the Taoiseach for additional resources. We need to deal with this. The sawmills are crying out for raw materials which they cannot get hold of. The problem is a blockage caused by obstructions

to planning and objections to licences. I would like to get this sorted out as a matter of urgency.

The Taoiseach: I have some reservations about what has happened here today. The Business Committee met and agreed the order for this week and I was not involved in that. For approximately 20 minutes, Deputies from parties which agreed to the Order of Business have been raising all sorts of issues. I am conscious there was meant to be 30 minutes for other Deputies to raise issues concerning legislation or other business. They have been denied the opportunity to do so because other Deputies got in ahead of them under the pretence of saying there should be a debate for this or that. That means there is a new Order of Business in play here, *de facto*, in which any Deputy can stand up and say he or she believes we should have a debate on this and, therefore, opposes the Order of Business. That is no way to proceed and it is not fair.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Taoiseach is trying to wash this.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Taoiseach has not mentioned planning licences once in his response. He only wants to create an argument. I appeal to him to do something about the felling licences not being granted. The Taoiseach would like the Government to brush it all under the carpet. That is all the Taoiseach wants.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Healy-Rae to calm down, so we can hear the Taoiseach without interruption.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Many Deputies in my party and in other parties are being denied an opportunity to raise issues because of what is going on here.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is because they will not take the Taoiseach on. They would not be quiet if they were listening to the people who elected them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to? It is not agreed.

Question, "That the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business be agreed to," put and declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I raise the issue of the Ballymurphy inquest announcement. The verdicts have come in and after 50 years, the families and those who have campaigned have been vindicated. All of those who were killed on those fateful days in August 1971 were innocent, innocent and innocent. The inquest also established that there was no effective investigation into any of those deaths.

Today is a day of great relief and one to acknowledge the families and campaigners for their persistence and stamina. I am sure the verdicts will be met with a sense of bittersweet victory.

As the Taoiseach knows, the British Government is proposing to step away from the arrangements in the Stormont House Agreement for dealing with the past and legacy, and specifically those dealing with State killings that have never been properly investigated. How does the Taoiseach propose that this House take a stand in response to the verdict of this inquest?

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I can barely hear myself think with the racket down the

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back. I know my time is up and I am going to sit down but the racket in the back is absolutely wicked, whatever is going on there.

Deputy David Cullinane: It is disrespectful. They are in the gallery.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputies in the gallery to restrain themselves.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Thank you.

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, our first thoughts today are with the families of those killed following the terrible violence and atrocities in Ballymurphy on those three terrible days in August 1971. I recall visiting the site at the time and meeting with the relatives. I was never in any doubt but that these innocent citizens were killed without any justification and that they were entirely innocent, and the inquest has found that. As we heard this morning on “Morning Ireland” and other programmes, there remains enormous personal grief and sense of loss, which is renewed when intensive media attention returns to a case like this. It has been a very harrowing experience for many relatives and there have been many false dawns while trying to get closure and justice. The inquest findings are worthy of some debate in the House, as I said earlier.

On the legacy issues, the Government is very clear that the legacy of violence remains a deep wound. It must be dealt with but the framework for dealing with it is within the Stormont House Agreement, which was agreed by the two Governments and all political parties. The victims must be our priority in the context of legacy issues.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Every week, I raise the issue of partners and husbands of pregnant women in maternity services, and I will continue to do so until it is resolved. Husbands and partners can go to Penneys this week, or buy clothes for their children through click and collect services. They can buy equipment and get their hair cut but they cannot attend maternity services. The Taoiseach, the Chief Medical Officer and the chief executive of the HSE have said that is wrong. The Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, said yesterday that there was no good reason for maternity hospitals to restrict visits from partners. Who is in charge? I often hear the Taoiseach say that clinical decisions override everything else, and I say it myself at times, but this is barbaric and wrong. Linda Kelly from Cork said that after she gave birth it was like “being released from prison”. She did not say that to be dramatic, because I know her. Last week, I raised the case of Gary Toohey, who stood in a car park looking up at his partner about to give birth. When will we have consistency across the board in all maternity services, with partners and husbands being allowed in at critical moments, as well as for the birth?

The Taoiseach: I agree 100% that there is no need for these restrictions now at all. I said that last week in this House. The Chief Medical Officer has said that, given the success of the vaccination programme, particularly within healthcare settings, the suppression of the virus among front-line healthcare workers and the high level of vaccination across the country, women’s partners should be with them, with proper precautions.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Then why is it not happening?

The Taoiseach: I will engage again with the HSE.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Who is in charge?

The Taoiseach: I have already spoken to the CEO of the HSE about telling the national clinical directors and clinical directors across all hospitals to facilitate such access.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The median age of the population of Gaza is 17.7 years. The size of the population is over 2 million. When bombs are dropped on an area of its size with that kind of population and with such a median age, it is inevitable that children will die. The Palestinian community is crying out for international solidarity and help. I am not even going to ask the Taoiseach about the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018, which Fianna Fáil supported during the period of the confidence and supply agreement and then moved away from when it went into government. I have a simpler question concerning the potential to bring a motion to the UN Security Council demanding that Israel halt settlement expansion in the Occupied Territories. I believe that could be a real sign of leadership. New Zealand, a country of similar size to ours, did it in 2016. Will Ireland take that substantial position to support the Palestinian people?

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy that it is not possible to bomb Gaza without killing innocent children, teenagers and civilians. I have been to Gaza. I walked through it in the aftermath of a war. It is densely populated, with people at close quarters. Bombing raids cause enormous devastation and killing and grief, and should not be proceeded with. I believe such raids are highly disproportionate to what is happening on the other side in the context of the firing of rockets, which is also wrong and which should not be happening either. Those responsible for the firing of rockets should desist also. You cannot bomb Gaza without killing children, teenagers and innocent civilians.

Ireland has a strong diplomatic record at the UN and at the Security Council. We should trust our diplomats and Ministers in this respect. This is not a situation for making gestures or doing the public thing. Seriously, if we want to make real progress on these issues, we should sometimes have a bit of self-respect for our own traditions of diplomacy, which have stood us in good stead. That is the point I am making.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, Taoiseach, but the time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Late in the day as it is and hollow sounding as it is, will the Taoiseach's claim that housing is now the Government's priority lead to any actual change in the disastrous policy that has led us to the housing crisis we are experiencing? There seems to be a grudging acknowledgement of what an absolute disaster Fine Gael and Labour made by allowing these vulture funds to come in and take over the housing sector. Will the Taoiseach follow through on the growing awareness of what a disaster that was by not allowing those same interests into the public land bank via the Land Development Agency Bill 2021? As it is currently constituted, the latter would effectively let the fox into the henhouse. I refer to the fox that wrecked the private housing sector being let into the public land bank. Will the Taoiseach realise the mistakes of the past and ensure that these vultures and cuckoos do not get into the public land bank through the legislation in question and will he accept amendments to the Bill to that effect?

The Taoiseach: There the Deputy goes again. He is going to stop that Bill now as well, or try to stop it. That Bill is needed, we need to get it through. Why? It is because we need to use State land to get houses built. Supply is the big issue here. The State is providing the largest social housing programme in its history. This year and over the next five years, we will also support the building, through serviced site funds, etc., of affordable houses. The State will be involved in getting those built for people as well. Therefore, the State is now the big player. I repeat that the State - the Government - is now the biggest player in the housing market. That is the reality, but we have to do more than that and there has to be a role for the private sector.

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We have to get builders out there building also, because we are not building enough houses.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They will be looked after well enough.

The Taoiseach: There were 20,000 built last year. Covid-19 has already stopped us building for three months this year. We might be lucky to get more than 20,000 houses built. We need supply.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. The time is up. I am sorry, but that concludes Questions on Promised Legislation, with 13 listed Deputies who had every expectation of getting in being unsuccessful in doing so. We may ask the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform to look at the length of time of interventions on the Order of Business, because they are consuming a lot of time.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: On a point of order-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Durkan.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: To be fair to everybody and enable everybody from all sides of the House and from all parties to have an opportunity to raise issues close to their hearts at the time of the Order of Business, would it be possible to encourage those who agree with the Business Committee's proposals to agree to them in the House, thus eliminating the erosion of other parties' time?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is something we can certainly consider and see if it is possible.

Protection of Young Persons (Employment) (Exclusion of Workers in the Fishing and Shipping Sectors) Regulations 2021: Motion

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Protection of Young Persons (Employment) (Exclusion of Workers in the Fishing and Shipping Sectors) Regulations 2021,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 3rd March, 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders and until further notice in the 33rd Dail, the schedule for the Dail sitting week, as contained in the report of the Committee on

Standing Orders and Dail Reform dated 10th May, 2021, shall be adopted with effect from 11th May, 2021, unless the Dail shall otherwise order or resolve, with the proviso that-

a) on Thursday 13th May, 2021, business pursuant to Standing Order 159(2) shall not be taken and the Dail shall adjourn on the conclusion of topical issues, and

(b) the sitting schedule for a Tuesday shall apply to a Wednesday, where the first day of a sitting week is a Wednesday.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Northern Ireland

1. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his latest communications with the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. [23062/21]

2. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his latest communications with the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland [24263/21]

3. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent communication with the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. [23955/21]

4. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his latest communications with the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. [24635/21]

5. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent engagements with the First Minister of Northern Ireland. [24641/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 5, inclusive, together.

I spoke with the First Minister, Mrs. Arlene Foster, on 28 April to wish her well after her announcement that she would be stepping down as First Minister of Northern Ireland and as leader of the DUP. I have had a positive working relationship with Arlene in a variety of roles over the years. In particular, I valued our constructive engagement, notwithstanding our differences, in our respective roles of Taoiseach and First Minister. I conveyed my best wishes to Arlene and her family for the future.

On 9 April I had phone calls with the First Minister, Arlene Foster, and the deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill. We discussed the current unrest on the streets of Northern Ireland and related issues. We agreed there was no excuse for violence and the attacks on police officers and others. I stressed the needs for ongoing dialogue and support for the peace process and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. I also welcomed the statement from the Northern Ireland Executive, published on 8 April 2021, condemning the violence and unrest on the streets. We agreed to keep in close contact on developments.

As previously outlined to the Dáil, I have also spoken with the First Minister and Deputy

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First Minister on a number of occasions, in particular, regarding Covid-19 and our respective approaches to the implementation and easing of restrictions.

Deputy Neale Richmond: As ever, I thank the Taoiseach for his full response.

There are number of key issues to discuss but like others, including Deputy McDonald, I believe it is important to note the verdict of the investigation into the Ballymurphy massacre and the need for continuing engagement between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister on all issues relating to legacy and the slightly worrying comments out of the Queen's speech to Parliament today.

Specifically, in respect of this question, I wish to raise the absolute need for deep engagement on the part of the Taoiseach and all Ministers in the Government with our partners in Northern Ireland in the coming weeks and months. Significant transition is about to take place and we all know the issues and the serious concerns that are at the back of many minds. How will the Taoiseach proceed to ensure that all meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council go ahead in the coming weeks and months? How will he reset relations with the new First Minister in the coming weeks? As for the issues the people of Northern Ireland are currently facing, how can we ensure that the Irish Government plays an proactive role in ensuring that fears are allayed and that we get back to enjoying the most normal relations possible in the interest of everyone on this island, regardless of their political background or lack of one?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We dealt earlier with how we finally have an element of justice for those who were killed in Ballymurphy in 1971. We feared the possibility of unilateral action from the British Government in respect of an amnesty for killings involving state forces. We believed we were in a bad situation in respect of relationships and what have you. Obviously, Brexit has been absolutely destabilising and has destabilised unionism but we need to ensure that, for the want of a better term, we can put the show on the road and that the Good Friday Agreement is enacted in every way possible. We have the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. We must ensure that the North-South Ministerial Council meets whenever necessary.

Therefore, we must engage with all those who may be leaders within unionism to ensure that we can deliver. I accept that there is a leadership contest under way but we must get our ducks in a row to ensure there is continuity. That means having straight conversations with the British Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and with leaders of unionism, in particular.

Deputy Mick Barry: I welcome the coroner's conclusions regarding the Ballymurphy massacre. It is a vindication for the families who have campaigned so hard down through the decades. It is a real scandal that the British state prevented the truth from coming out for 50 years. Today also, the British Government has declared an amnesty for its troops, which is a slap in the face to the Ballymurphy families and others. There must be no obstacles placed in the way of families campaigning for truth and justice around these issues.

In conclusion, the coroner criticised the British army troops of the infamous Parachute Regiment. The truth was told about Derry and it is now being told about Ballymurphy. I ask the Taoiseach to raise with the First Minister the point that the truth must also be told about the paratroopers' shooting of civilians on the Shankill Road.

The Taoiseach: In response to Deputy Richmond's questions, it is extremely important that the meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council proceed and that all parties to the Good Friday Agreement honour their obligations under it. That involves full attendance at the sec-

toral meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council. I was glad that that did happen in the transport sector in terms of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan's sectoral meeting in the presence of Ms Nichola Mallon and the First Minister.

In respect of the new First Minister and whosoever is elected, my door is always open and I will work to constructively engage, as I have always done and will continue to do. I believe the only way we can work on this island is for all politicians from all persuasions to engage in the democratic process and dialogue, as well as to seek to reach understandings on common ideas and projects. The shared island initiative that we have undertaken is designed to be a constructive dialogue and engagement with all sectors on the island of Ireland. This includes research projects, industrial joint projects, education and infrastructural and amenity projects like the Ulster Canal and the greenways projects and much more. We have provided half a billion euro in funding to enable us to do that. We are working on a whole range of projects in that regard.

We will do everything we possibly can to allay the fears of certain sectors of society in the North. However, we also need to move strongly in respect of working with the British Government and the Northern Ireland Executive on educational disadvantage, school completion and supporting young people in communities that do not have a tradition of school completion or progression to further and third level education. We must take the initiatives to alter that once and for all and create a new paradigm for young people born into certain communities within Northern Ireland who have not had that experience or tradition. That needs to change in terms of the future of Northern Ireland.

On legacy issues, I believe that the framework is there in terms of the Stormont House Agreement of 2014. There can be no unilateral changing of what has been agreed between two Governments and all of the political parties in the North. In my view, the victims and those killed by state security forces, the IRA and loyalist paramilitaries need justice and there must be accountability. We have always been conscious of the needs of victims and the need to prioritise their needs in dealing with legacy issues. The legacy issues have dragged on for far too long. Too many families are without closure or the satisfactory provision of information and transparency around the death of their loved ones, often in very brutal and savage circumstances. In my view, that is something we have to continue to keep in mind. It is about the victims, what they have gone through and what their families have gone through in particular.

That also applies to Deputy Barry's question. The truth should always win out in respect of atrocities carried out by whomever, and particularly in terms of either the Parachute Regiment or other state security endeavours. There have been lots of comprehensive inquiries under way in regard to collusion. Operation Kenova - or Project Kenova, or whatever title it has - is going on at the moment. It is a very widespread investigation in terms of Stakeknife and all that and the engagement between elements within the paramilitaries and state security services. We need the truth to all of this. We need to understand what happened and the victims and families, in particular, need to understand. They have waited far too long for all of this to come out.

Northern Ireland

6. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland last met. [23211/21]

7. Deputy Mick Barry asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Brexit and

Northern Ireland last met and will next meet. [24636/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 and 7 together.

The Cabinet committee on Brexit and Northern Ireland operates in accordance with established guidelines for Cabinet committees and, where appropriate, substantive issues are referred to Government for discussion and approval. In general terms, the Cabinet committee oversees implementation of relevant programme for Government commitments in the area of Brexit and Northern Ireland and ongoing relevant developments. The committee was formally established by the Government on 6 July 2020 and had its first meeting on 29 October 2020. The Cabinet committee last met on 4 March 2021. The next meeting remains to be scheduled.

Relevant issues are also regularly considered at meetings of the full Cabinet, including most recently on 27 April, when a comprehensive memorandum on Brexit was presented. In addition to meetings of the full Cabinet and of Cabinet committees, I also meet Ministers on an individual basis to focus on particular issues where required.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Ireland was allocated €1 billion of the €5 billion fund in January 2021. The fund was intended to mitigate the losses to Irish businesses etc. in the context of Brexit. It is said that some member states are trying to reconfigure how that fund is being distributed. Are we secure in the allocation we have been given? Has any part of it been drawn down at this stage?

In regard to the shared island unit, the €500 million that has been made available will be out to 2025. Is there a list of projects at this stage and has any of the funding been drawn down yet?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach referred earlier to the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement in their totality and the extent to which they have to function and deliver. He referred to strand two, the North-South Ministerial Council and, indeed, the cross-border bodies. These are integral to the arrangements we have across the island. As the Taoiseach knows, DUP Ministers have sought to disrupt this, in protest, they say, at the Brexit protocol. What action have the Taoiseach and the Government taken to ensure all the institutions operate successfully? When might a North-South Ministerial Council plenary be convened? Will these matters be addressed by the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which I understand is to be held next month?

As the Taoiseach knows, despite the democratic wishes of the people and their elected representatives in majority, the North is facing a considerable realignment in terms of benefits that have been recklessly lost as a result of Brexit. In that regard, can the Taoiseach outline what progress has been made on the PEACE PLUS programme in terms of support for the North, when the draft programme will be submitted to the European Commission and when the Government expects to launch the programme to allow critical funding supports to be awarded to the North?

The Taoiseach: First, on Deputy Catherine Murphy's question in terms of the Brexit fund, there have been, or were, some representations being made by other member states to try to eke out an additional share of funding. However, we are close to agreement on this and Ireland was allocated close to €1 billion under the fund. We are close to a resolution on this now at European Council level and I anticipate, at the next Council meeting perhaps, that we should have agreement on it. It is important funding, particularly for sectors that have been affected and impacted most by Brexit, in the regions and rural Ireland in particular.

On the shared island funding, we have allocated moneys. At the last North-South Ministerial Council plenary before Christmas, we indicated a number of areas for funding, particularly the Ulster Canal. Some €13 million has been allocated, €7 million from the shared island fund and approximately €6 million from the rural regeneration and development fund, to phase 2 of the Ulster Canal. A total of €12 million is for phase 2 and €1 million is to get the design ready for phase 3. We want to complete the Ulster Canal project in its entirety, utilising the funding in the shared island fund and the regeneration funding. That is a very good project in itself. We are also looking at a joint industrial project, partnering with City Deal in Derry, to provide an industrial complex on the Derry side and on the Donegal side. That is in partnership with the North West Regional Development Group.

We have already funded some minor research projects under the shared island funding itself. People can bid for up to €20,000 in funding for research projects. There is also a more substantive research piece being developed in partnership with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, and his Department in respect of collaboration between third level institutions on the island of Ireland on issues of mutual benefit to the island. That could be cybersecurity, for example, or it could be climate. There will be competition for that funding and it is intended that the universities or institutes of technology would bid for it. We have also committed to the A5 and to Narrow Water Bridge and we have some work to do to get them going. These are the projects that have been committed to already under the fund. We have also invited community groups and so on to put forward ideas for further funding.

In response to Deputy McDonald, I have met all the North-South bodies and gone through the fund with them. We stand in support of the bodies in respect of any particular projects they may have under their aegis, to get those projects going, from Ulster Scots to the Irish language to a range of other projects on the tourism side, for example, which could give a very interesting North-South dimension for people travelling North and South and tourism coming in from overseas. There is a good list of healthy projects and I can arrange that some briefing be made available to the Deputy in that regard.

In terms of the North-South Ministerial Council, my understanding is that the next meeting is due in June, which is important. As I said earlier, with the situation within the DUP and the election of a new First Minister, we obviously must await the outcome of that election. The outgoing First Minister has made it clear and articulated publicly that they are not boycotting the North-South Ministerial Council. My view is that there is a very clear obligation on all signatories to the Good Friday Agreement to honour the agreement and participate in these North-South meetings, which are important in terms of the wider issues.

On PEACE PLUS, it has been a very successful round. We secured €120 million in an initial allocation from the European Union. That, of course, gets matched by the Government, the British Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. It is now estimated that up to €1 billion, through all the matched funding, will be available for PEACE PLUS. There has to be some work done between the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the other relevant stakeholders in terms of the operationalisation and allocation of that fund. It is an exciting project in itself. There is a substantial amount of money there, which illustrates the continued benefits of European Union membership and also reflects the Union's interest in peace on the island of Ireland. The EU has made a long-standing commitment to that peace.

I recall when I was Minister for Foreign Affairs many years ago, the DUP and Sinn Féin had

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difficulties and we were in Downing Street. It was just after we had lost the first Lisbon treaty referendum, which was about the only subject at that time that the DUP and Sinn Féin agreed on. Both parties were happy that we had lost the first referendum, though, thankfully, the second referendum was won. I make the point that the European Union's interest in the North has been positive and constructive. The EU sees it as one of the success stories in terms of peace processes across Europe.

Europe is sensitive to the current issues and Commissioner Maroš Šefcovic and Mr. David Frost are now engaged in a process that I hope will facilitate a working through of some of the issues that have arisen in respect of the protocol. I hope we can have a constructive engagement on that front because it is important. We must all work collectively to reduce tensions on an ongoing basis. We will have ongoing interactions with the British Government in respect of the need to ensure that whatever we do, we do it with a view to maintaining stability and peace, defusing tensions, and enabling the workings of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement as effectively, efficiently and peacefully as we can.

Departmental Functions

8. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the public service, justice and police reform division of his Department. [21617/21]

9. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social policy and public service reform division of his Department. [21776/21]

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social policy and public service reform division of his Department. [21778/21]

11. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the public service, justice and police reform division of his Department. [22858/21]

43. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social policy and public service reform division of his Department. [24140/21]

44. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the justice and police reform division of his Department. [24141/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 to 11, inclusive, 43 and 44 together.

The role of the social and public service reform division is to assist me, as Taoiseach, and the Government in delivering programme for Government objectives on public policies and services which help create a socially inclusive and fair society. Specifically, the division assists the work of the Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality and the associated senior officials' group established to oversee implementation of programme for Government commitments in the areas of social policy, equality and public services, including matters relating to arts and culture, children, justice, policing reform and community safety, disability, social inclusion, gender equality, direct provision, the Irish language and sport; the Cabinet committee on education and the associated senior officials' group established to oversee implementation of programme for Government commitments in the area of education and further and higher education; the Cabinet committee on health and the associated senior officials' group established to oversee programme for Government commitments in the area of health, including implementa-

tion of health reforms, including Sláintecare and the development of mental health services; and the Cabinet committee on Covid-19 and the associated senior officials' group established to assess the social and economic impacts of the potential spread of Covid-19 and to oversee the cross-government response.

A policing reform implementation programme office forms part of the division. This office drives the implementation of A Policing Service for our Future, the Government's plan to implement the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. The division also assists the work of the Civil Service management board which oversees Civil Service renewal; has departmental oversight of the National Economic and Social Council; advances Dublin's north-east inner city initiative, including through supporting the work of a programme office, programme implementation board and oversight group; assists the delivery of public service reform through membership of the public service leadership board and public service management group; provides me with briefing and speech material on social policy and public service reform issues; and participates in relevant interdepartmental committees and other groups.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Earlier this year, the Taoiseach committed to doing all he could to bring closure to the families of those who died in the Stardust fire. That commitment has not been fulfilled and I urge him to act swiftly to rectify that. In order to access legal advice, the families must apply for legal aid for the inquest into the deaths of their loved ones. The process is intrusive for all families due to the volume and breadth of documentation and personal information they are required to submit. A number of families have been refused access to legal aid as they own their own homes. It is unimaginable, having had to battle the State for four decades to secure this inquest, for the State to now block their access to legal advice.

The Minister for Justice could resolve this matter quickly. Section 29(2) of the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 provides for a discretion to waive the requirement of the financial eligibility test. Section 37 of the same Act states that the Minister may make such regulations. The Legal Aid Board has confirmed that, in the absence of the Minister's regulations, it cannot and will not waive the financial eligibility test. When my colleague, Deputy Doherty, raised this matter with him in committee two weeks ago, the Taoiseach committed to pursuing the matter on behalf of the families. Can he confirm what action he has taken? Has the Minister for Justice drawn up the necessary statutory instrument to provide for this regulation, as advised by the Legal Aid Board? This is a matter of great importance and urgency.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There is a considerable amount of international evidence about the importance of hot nutritious meals for pupils in school. Pupils who receive such meals are healthier, less likely to be tired in class and more likely to be attentive. The younger they get access to those meals, the better. That is why I welcome the hot school meal programme. However, the programme is drastically underfunded given that almost 100 schools that applied have been unable to access it. One particularly unjust example of a school that has missed out is Knockmore Junior School in Killinarden, a DEIS - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools - school with 149 young pupils. The situation is particularly unjust because many of the other schools in the area have access to hot school meals, which is great, but means that the brothers and sisters of some Knockmore pupils will be getting the hot school meals they need while their younger brothers and sisters will not be getting that access. I ask the Taoiseach to intervene with the Minister and the Department to ensure those children are able to access the hot school meals they need and that all the schools that need access to this programme are able to get it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I also think it is beyond despicable that the Stardust families are not being given legal aid. The Taoiseach should address that as a matter of absolute urgency because the families have been through enough and do not need further obstacles put in the way of their pursuit of justice.

I wish to raise a matter I have raised with the Taoiseach a number of times, that is, the plight of people training to be psychologists. We have unacceptable waiting lists in this country for mental health services. Thousands of children, teenagers and adults are on waiting lists for mental health services and they are often urgently in need of counselling and psychological treatment. I have met three times with psychology students, most of whom are young but some of whom are older and have gone into psychology later in life. The most extraordinary barriers are being put in front of those students attempting to get doctorates in psychology. They must work as assistant psychologists without pay. Posts have been advertised recently to that effect and those are not isolated examples because the practice is going on all the time. People are paying extortionate fees for an education and counselling psychology doctorate and receive no funding whatsoever. There are a tiny number of places available. Students are working on placement without pay. There are extraordinary barriers that mean large numbers of people cannot get through the system. When we have all these waiting lists and a mental health crisis that needs to be addressed, why is the Government not making it easy and supporting people who want to become psychologists in order to address the mental health crisis and waiting lists in this area?

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I wish to deal with the issue of the policing reform implementation and whether it is the role of the Garda Commissioner to allocate the necessary resources. One cannot have policing reform without some changes. Obviously, the previous Government endorsed the report, A Policing Service for the Future, and an implementation group, which is chaired by Ms Helen Ryan, is dedicated to the implementation of the programme. Associated with the report are ideas such as the sixth principle, which states, “An Garda Síochána should be structured and managed to support front line policing.” Much of that is community policing. I previously published a report on policing resource across the State, which I have updated for 2021. There is no real evidence that there has been a change in the allocation of resources. There are very big differences between some parts of the country. Areas which are growing rapidly in population tend to be left behind, for example. It is a big bone of contention for certain areas where many new developments are only a disadvantage in terms of public services. Will the Taoiseach look at this issue and talk the Garda Commissioner? To be honest, there will not be reform unless the resource allocations are also reformed. I, too, speak in support of the Stardust families and the assistance they require for the inquests.

Deputy Mick Barry: I had intended to ask the Taoiseach about the fact that more than 50% of Covid-19 fines have been handed out to people between the ages of 18 and 24. There has been an increase in Garda harassment of young people, who are also suffering disproportionately as a result of unemployment at present. I will ask the Taoiseach about that matter another day, however,

Last night, or more correctly, in the early hours of this morning, we saw workers lifted off picket lines outside the Debenhams store in Waterford. They were physically removed from sitting positions by gardaí in order to clear the way for trucks driven by non-union labour to remove disputed stock from the store. The intervention of those gardaí came after a five-hour stand-off between midnight and 5 a.m. Members of the public order unit from Waterford were there in big numbers, the area around the store was sealed off by gardaí and traffic was diverted.

Some 40 gardaí were involved in this operation. In other words, more gardaí were present than there were Debenhams workers and their supporters. Those officers were backed up by six big police vans.

There is an issue here for the media to get its teeth into. I find it incredible that this is not one of the top news stories in the national media today. That says something about how sharp the media is on these issues, or not, as the case may be. We are talking here about policing reform, however.

Workers are not criminals and should not be treated this way by gardaí. In fact, the role of gardaí should be connected to dealing with crime and antisocial behaviour. They should not be involved in industrial disputes full stop. I will end this contribution with a statement. As part of the policing reform being considered, the removal of the Garda Síochána from involvement of the kind we saw last night in respect of industrial disputes should be on the agenda. It would be interesting to hear a comment on that from the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: In the first instance, Deputy McDonald raised the issue - it has been commented on by others - of the Stardust inquest and related legal fees. The Stardust fire was a most traumatic national tragedy that has left a terrible and particular legacy of pain for many people in north Dublin. I greatly sympathise with all the families of the 48 young people who were tragically killed in that fire 40 years ago for the awful loss they suffered. I also recognise the terrible impact it had on everyone who attended the Stardust that night.

The Minister for Justice is absolutely committed to ensuring that all the families of the victims of the Stardust fire tragedy receive the supports they need in terms of legal aid at the new inquests. Extensive work has already been undertaken towards this end. Government funding of up to €8 million has been allocated for the new inquests to cover a number of areas, including legal aid for the families. The last remaining issue regarding legal aid for the families was the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2013, which made a set of amendments to the Coroners Act 1962 and the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 that enabled legal aid at inquests in certain conditions. Officials working for the Minister for Justice reviewed alternative arrangements for funding legal professionals, which were not considered to be the best option in terms of meeting the needs of the families compared to the facility provided by the Legal Aid Board. Section 60 of the Coroners Act 1962, as amended, provides a procedure whereby a family member of the deceased may apply to the coroner for a request to be submitted to the board with regard to the granting of legal aid. Applications for legal aid have been certified by the coroner and these applications are with the Legal Aid Board.

Ordinarily, applicants through the legal aid system would pay an initial fee and support would be provided on the basis of a means test. This is how the legal aid scheme works for all the individuals who seek its help and it is a widely respected system. All of the Stardust families who meet the criteria of the Legal Aid Board, including the means test, will receive support. The usual fee for legal aid applications has been waived and the legal professionals will receive refunds of their costs one month in arrears instead of after the inquests. This goes beyond the provisions of the legislation in order to try to allay any concerns people may have.

The Legal Aid Board notified the Department of Justice that a very small number of the Stardust victims' families would not qualify for legal aid because they exceed the income limits currently enforced by the Legal Aid Board, as required under the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995. The Minister for Justice has assured me that she is actively investigating the position and engaging

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with the Attorney General's office to explore possible mechanisms to provide for legal aid to those families who do not meet the financial eligibility requirements under the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995. This will require new arrangements to be put in place, such as new regulations. This matter has been actively worked on since the issue was identified to ensure that an appropriate solution is found. The Minister for Justice intends that the families and their legal professionals will have a response shortly and that the Stardust inquest should commence a few weeks after that. I will engage with the Minister again after today's session to make sure that can be expedited.

Significant progress has been made in respect of policing reform and A Policing Service for the Future. The Government's plan to implement the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland is a living document, which is reviewed and updated as required to maintain ambitious but realistic commitments, timeframes and milestones. The policing reform implementation office, which is based in the Department of the Taoiseach, monitors progress and supports the work of the implementation group as well as keeping the high level steering board of policing reform and Government apprised of progress being made.

The first two phases of A Policing Service for the Future, that is, the building-block phase of six months' duration and the launching phase of four to six months, have been completed and much has already been achieved, for example, the roll-out of a new operating model for An Garda Síochána designed to streamline administration and provide a more visible response from localised policing service to communities nationwide.

An Garda Síochána has established and strengthened resourcing of a human rights unit and re-established the strategic human rights advisory committee. The National Security Analysis Centre, NSAC, has been established and the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2019 has been enacted, which gives gardaí access to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, for the first time and provides for a modern industrial relations framework within An Garda Síochána.

There has also been progress on legislative reform. As Deputies will be aware, the Government recently published a general scheme of the landmark policing, security and community safety Bill. I am not aware of the issues raised by Deputy Barry in terms of Waterford but I will have that checked out.

I will raise Deputy Paul Murphy's issue of hot meals for the specific school in Killinarden with the Minister for Social Protection. Deputy Boyd Barrett raised, as he did last week, the issue of postgraduate psychological programmes and the costs associated. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is looking at a variety of supports which can be made available to postgraduate students more generally, not just in one specific area.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - to discuss the increasing incidents of worldwide human rights abuses while the global community is preoccupied with Covid-19; (2) Deputy Maurice Quinli-

van - to discuss the issue of overcrowding at the University Hospital Limerick; (3) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss an update on plans for St. Gabriel's Special School, Bishopstown; (4) Deputy Neasa Hourigan - to discuss steps to curb the amount of planning being allocated to build-to-rent developments; (5) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss when the review of income thresholds to qualify for a place on a local authority housing list will be completed; (6) Deputy Ciarán Cannon - in light of the increased numbers of cyclists on our roads, their vulnerability as road users, and their capacity to video record incidents of close passing and other dangerous manoeuvres by motorists, will the Minister for Justice consider directing An Garda Síochána to establish a dedicated portal for the submission of such video evidence, staffed by specially trained gardaí with the capacity to assess such evidence and bring forward prosecutions if necessary; (7) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss uncertainty regarding the Arklow vaccination centre in County Wicklow; (8) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss the need to examine school transport issues emerging in east Cork; (9) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the provision of dental services in Laois and Offaly; (10) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the impact of strategic housing developments in local planning in areas such as Ballymun, Finglas and Santry; (11) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - to discuss the government decision to wind-up the Digital Hub Development Agency in the Liberties; (12) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss the situation of Saplings Special School in north Kildare; (13) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss challenges facing the taxi industry; (14) Deputy Pa Daly - to discuss the effect of the current health restrictions on the holding of parkruns; (15) Deputy Marian Harkin - to discuss the Government's plan for the provision of a cath lab at Sligo University Hospital; (16) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss an update on the review of the relationships and sexuality education, RSE, curriculum in primary and secondary schools, announced in 2018; (17) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss an up-to-date on the planned new 96-bed ward block at University Hospital Limerick; (18) Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Gino Kenny and Chris Andrews - to discuss the Government's response to the Human Rights Watch report, *A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*; (19) Deputy Neale Richmond - to discuss the extension of Erasmus+ to students in Northern Ireland; (20) Deputy Dara Calleary - to discuss the design and operation of the defective blocks (pyrite-mica) scheme; (21) Deputies Martin Browne and Violet-Anne Wynne - to discuss the inclusion of Bedrocan under the compassionate access programme; (22) Deputies Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and Verona Murphy - to discuss the ongoing restrictions on partners attending at maternity hospitals; (23) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Danny Healy-Rae, Michael Collins and Carol Nolan - to call for a complete suspension of all State funding to An Taisce, pending a comprehensive financial review of the organisation's use of public funds over the past decade, in light of the ongoing campaigns, legal or otherwise, by the organisation against jobs, livelihoods, investment and ordinary people in rural Ireland, most recently again highlighted by the legal appeal against the Glanbia cheese manufacturing facility in Belview, County Kilkenny; (24) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss securing stable and adequate broadband connections through National Broadband Ireland, NBI; (25) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss plans for ensuring the opening of the group home in Carrickmacross for people with physical and sensory disabilities; and (26) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss Louth-Meath mental health services, particularly provision of care for patients during and post the Covid-19 pandemic.

The matters raised by Deputies Bernard J. Durkan; Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Gino Kenny, Chris Andrews and Patrick Costello; Jennifer Murnane O'Connor; and Jennifer Whitmore have been selected for discussion.

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Europe Day: Statements

The Taoiseach: It gives me great pleasure to open this debate to mark Europe Day. Europe Day is a celebration of peace and unity in Europe. It marks the birthday of what is today the European Union, the direct enabler of historic progress on this island and throughout Europe. In the face of constant opposition from the extremes of the right and the left, the European Union has prevailed. It has led to a dramatic improvement in living standards for every community. It has protected democracy and spoken up for solidarity. It has opposed the many extremist voices which continue to promote ideologies which offer nothing more than angry words and an ignorance of history.

It is a Union which Ireland joined freely 50 years ago with hopes and aspirations which have been met and exceeded time and again. In a world where the arrogant, defensive and inward-looking nationalism of the past has tried to reassert itself, the European Union has stood for a positive vision. It is a vision where sovereignty is enhanced by confident nations working together constructively and with strong rules to ensure fairness.

Like any entity built by people, it has its flaws and some of these are serious. In any honest debate, however, we have to make time to acknowledge its overwhelmingly positive contributions. We need to reaffirm our commitment to the core spirit of co-operation at its heart. The idea of working to replace conflict with co-operation is as old as Europe itself.

History records many visionaries who looked at a Continent defined by warfare and called for a new approach. In the 1920s and 1930s, one finds Irish leaders like Éamon de Valera and Seán Lemass responding to rising tensions in Europe by calling for strong rules-based organisations. De Valera's appeal to the League of Nations to respect limits of the actions of states remains one of the shining high points of Irish foreign policy and is one of the most prophetic predictions in the 1930s about where Europe might head. Seán Lemass, as a young man imprisoned after the Civil War, devoted himself to reading economic and political texts which might show a new road forward for Ireland. His attraction to the idea of European economic co-operation began at that point.

So it was that the generation that fought for our independence continued to define our future as a positive and outward looking one, just as we find in the spirit of the 1916 Proclamation. It remains the greatest tragedy of modern history that it took the disaster of the Second World War for Europe to turn to building strong rules-based co-operation. Robert Schuman wished to see a Europe where war between European nations would become a thing of the past.

Much has happened over the past 70 years. The European Union now comprises 27 member states from all parts of Europe, including many for whom membership of the Union has been central to overcoming the legacy of right-wing and left-wing totalitarian regimes. While the European Union is by no means perfect, there are great advantages for a small, open, trading nation being at the centre of the European project. Over the decades, we have shared many significant milestones and weathered many storms together. There were good times like the reunification of Germany in 1990 or the addition of ten new member states under the Irish Presidency of the Council in 2004. There have also been more difficult ones including the economic crisis, the departure of the United Kingdom and, of course, more recently the Covid-19 pandemic. In good times and in bad, there has always been strength in unity.

I acknowledge in particular the role of the European Union in supporting the Good Friday

Agreement and peace on this island. The European Union has been an essential backdrop and forum where Irish and British Ministers and officials built the relationships which made possible the Anglo-Irish Agreement and later the Good Friday Agreement, as well as subsequent agreements. Peace has been the most transformative change of all in Ireland over the past 20 years and more. Throughout the peace process, the European Union has stood with us.

Our partners in the European institutions worked to protect peace and the Good Friday Agreement throughout the negotiations on Brexit. They are working with us now as we seek to bed down the new arrangements. This is the first Europe Day since the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement was signed in December last year and ratified by the European Parliament last month. We are now in the earliest days of a new European Union-United Kingdom dispensation. It is clear that it will take time for the United Kingdom to become comfortable with its new relationship with the European Union and *vice versa*.

At an early point in the Brexit negotiations, the United Kingdom decided to leave the Single Market and the customs union, even if it sometimes cavilled at what the inevitable consequences of this choice would be. In choosing that path, the United Kingdom stepped outside the seamless trading environment of the European Union. Being outside means friction. While this is an obstacle to trade, it should not be one to partnership. It is a time now to rebuild trust, which has become a scarcer commodity following more than four years of negotiation and upheaval.

As we in Ireland know from all our key relationships, whether as a member of the UN Security Council currently, as a EU member state or as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, trust is the very stuff of peace, prosperity, partnership and success. That is also why Ireland has chosen our own path. It is the path of the European Union, where countries play by the same rules, co-operate freely and fairly and try to raise all boats. Never did our choice resonate more than it did over those four and a half years as the European Union and United Kingdom negotiated the UK's withdrawal agreement and then the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement. At times, there were difficult days during these negotiations. Amidst all of the uncertainty caused by Brexit, one unequivocal certainty came to the fore, namely, the certain value of the solidarity that comes from being a member state of the European Union.

Over the past year, Covid-19 has challenged us all and tested our resolve. Governments in the European Union and beyond have been faced with difficult choices as they sought to protect life and health, while also limiting the damage to jobs, enterprise and economies. The European Union's institutions were also faced with a crisis and a challenge of immense scale in an area where the Union's competence and ability to respond were constrained.

Despite this, the European Union has played a pivotal role in our collective response to the pandemic. The European Commission has supported vaccine development and procurement. We can clearly see those benefits now. Approximately 200 million doses of safe and effective vaccines have already been distributed inside the European Union, not much more than a year since the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic. A further 200 million vaccines have been exported from the European Union to 90 other countries. This makes the European Union the foremost bloc in the production and distribution of vaccines in the entire world, a point which does not get the commentary it deserves and gets undermined in domestic commentary here. This is a remarkable achievement by the European Union in itself.

The Commission's work on vaccines is a clear example of the EU responding to its citizens' needs and supporting member states' efforts to combat the pandemic. As I noted, large quanti-

ties of vaccines produced in the EU have been exported to over 90 countries across the world.

However, we acknowledge we must do more to support global solidarity. The European Union will continue its efforts to contribute to the international response to the pandemic, including through the COVAX facility, and we must continue to ensure nobody is left behind. The European Union launched its Team Europe initiative in April last year and has so far mobilised a budget of over €40 billion of resources from the European Union, its member states and financial institutions. Ireland will play its part. We responded rapidly in recent weeks to provide life saving equipment to India in response to the worsening Covid-19 outbreak there. This support is part of the coordinated effort by the European Union member states, through the European Civil Protection Mechanism.

It is clear Covid-19 will leave deep and lasting economic and social impacts. Last year, the European Union, its institutions and its member states came together in a way that has demonstrated to its citizens the strength there is in unity. The €1.8 trillion budgetary package agreed by the European Council last July – my own first meeting as Taoiseach - represents a new and important milestone in European Union solidarity. The spectre of the pandemic was to the forefront of all our minds as we worked over the course of four long days and nights to address the gravity of this unprecedented collective challenge. Despite sometimes very difficult negotiations, we agreed a fair, balanced and ambitious package to support Europe's economic recovery and to drive the climate and digital transformation on which our future well-being and prosperity rely. This includes a targeted and front-loaded investment, through the recovery and resilience facility, and reinforcement of key MFF programmes. Importantly, the recovery package sent a message that in the most testing of times, even when there are differing views as to the right approach and the best way forward, European Union leaders can work together and find a compromise that delivers for our citizens. In the middle of possibly the greatest challenge our Union has faced, there probably could not have been a better outcome.

Over the next seven years we will contribute more to the EU budget than we will receive and in doing so we will extend the same solidarity to others that we have benefited from over many decades. We do this because this is a model that works. The path to full economic recovery will be very challenging and we will need to use all of the tools available to us. Among the most important of these is the Single Market. We will need to harness its full potential to drive the digital and climate transformations on which our future prosperity depends. In building the Single Market of the future, economic openness remains crucial. The European Union should continue to work and advocate for strong, open, rules-based, multilateralism as a framework within which we can advance our interests and defend our values. In that respect, recent work in respect of the value of trade deals, under the aegis of the European Union, revealed very significant benefits for small to medium-sized enterprises in Ireland and indeed for the multinational presence in Ireland. Therefore, the House, and those who are opposed to the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, and other trade deals need really to reappraise that opposition because the evidence about the Canada deal and also the Japan deal, South Korea deal and other trade deals is quite significant in terms of the value to GDP and also the value added to Irish companies which create jobs here and produce products and solutions for the global market and help to solve many problems across the globe.

As I said, the European Union is more than just a shared marketplace. The Porto Declaration, signed by European Union leaders this weekend, makes clear that our shared European ideal is first and foremost about improving the lives of our citizens. It marks an important milestone in setting a progressive EU agenda for the decade ahead. I joined European Union leaders

at the social summit at the invitation of the Portuguese Presidency to reinforce our collective national and European Union-level commitment to implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. The concrete employment, skills and poverty-reduction targets to be achieved by 2030 are an exemplar of the practical focus I believe is necessary in setting the strategic direction for the period ahead. These European Union targets are for an adult employment rate of 78%, 60% of adults to be in training annually and a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, including at least 5 million children. They provide the right political emphasis for the European Union and member states in steering the European semester process of economic governance for annual budgets, including this year's national recovery and resilience plans. It is very welcome that the social pillar will continue to provide a clear political compass for our collective actions in responding effectively to 21st century challenges and opportunities and equipping our citizens with the skills and capabilities for full economic and social participation.

There are other important challenges that can only be faced by working together with others. Last December, European Union leaders took the opportunity to reinforce Europe's leadership role on climate. As we reached the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement, the European Union stepped-up its ambition level and committed to an increase in the EU 2030 target to at least 55% emissions reduction. We also agreed to raise our climate ambition in a manner that will drive sustainable economic growth, create jobs, deliver health and environmental benefits for European Union citizens and contribute to the long-term global competitiveness of the European Union economy. The European Union green deal is at the forefront of European Union priorities and we collectively grapple with the challenge of transforming our economies and societies in the years ahead. Later this month, the European Council will continue its discussion on climate and over the summer the Commission will present its Fit for 55 suite of measures to drive implementation of our target.

We must also work together on the twin challenge of progressing the digital transition. The Digital Compass proposals presented by the European Commission in March are a further important contribution in this regard. They include clear ambitions for digital skills, data and connectivity infrastructure and for increasing the digital intensity of business and our public services. In March, European Union leaders set important political orientations for the ambitious legislative agenda being advanced by the Commission on digital issues, which are becoming fundamental to the dynamism of the Single Market. An open, well-functioning, competitive and innovative digital economy is clearly the essential basis for the European Union's future economic strength. It is important we continue to strike the right balance here, shaping Europe's future in a direction that remains open, competitive and innovation-friendly while strengthening the European Union's commitments to rules-based multilateralism.

We must also acknowledge the role the European Union plays on the world stage. The US President, Mr. Biden, recently joined European leaders by video conference. The European Union and the United States will not agree on everything but no serious progress on global challenges is possible without strong EU-US cooperation. Ireland's ambition is for the European Union to become an ever-stronger advocate and actor in support of resilient, open, rules-based political and economic multilateralism. This is the most effective and indeed only effective way to advance our interests and to defend our values. This pandemic has shown, in very sharp relief, just how interlinked the world is. No country can stand aside and ignore the global context for social and economic inequality, organised misinformation, the erosion of core values and the existential issues of climate change and the biodiversity crisis. We must do more than

recognise these issues. We must contribute actively to global, international and regional alliances and initiatives to tackle and to counter them. That is why Ireland puts such store in our international engagement, through the European Union and United Nations in particular.

On Sunday the Conference on the Future of Europe was formally launched in Strasbourg. I welcome the conference as a practical way of boosting citizen engagement with the European Union. The peace and prosperity brought by this unique political project has undoubtedly improved the lives of all Europeans. In securing this peace and prosperity for the 21st century and building together our bridge to a brighter future, this is the right time for a stronger citizen-focused dialogue that can reinvigorate our democracies, give new voice to the priorities of our families and communities and begin a deeper engagement with the collective intelligence of our villages, towns, cities and regions. The joint declaration signed in March by the European Parliament President, David Sassoli, the Prime Minister of Portugal, António Costa, on behalf of the Presidency of the Council and Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, paves the way to a series of debates and discussions that will enable people from every corner of the Continent to share their ideas on shaping Europe's future. Our own national launch event will take place this Friday, 14 May led by the Minister of State with responsibility for EU Affairs, Deputy Thomas Byrne, and I look forward to constructive and considered Oireachtas support for this important initiative.

As we mark Europe Day, let us recall that Ireland will be an advocate for a strong and effective European Union, defined by democracy, the rule of law and solidarity. We will actively engage bilaterally and through international organisations to support open and fair trade, combat disinformation, protect democracies and promote understanding. Whether we are acting globally or locally, there are many challenges best faced in solidarity and co-operation with European partners.

Mar a deir an seanfhocal, ní neart go cur le chéile agus is é sin croílár chlár an Aontais Eorpaigh. Is aontas é atá thar a bheith tábhachtach i saol na linne inniu, go háirithe don tír seo ach, mar aon leis sin, don domhan ar fad. Tá tionchar faoi leith ag an Aontas Eorpach. Is iontach an scéal é go bhfuil an tír seo fós páirteach sa chlár seo agus go bhfuil an-chuid ag teacht as, ach go bhfuil muidne, chomh maith, ag déanamh an-chuid laistigh den Eoraip agus den Aontas Eorpach agus go raibh fada buan an clár seo.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We mark the 71st anniversary of the Schuman Declaration at a time of profound change and challenge for Ireland and Europe. The global pandemic has given us pause to think about the world in which we live. In these days of loss and uncertainty, people have demonstrated a remarkable resilience to weather the present and to look to the future with ambition. As we continue the fight against Covid-19, the prospect of getting our lives back fills our hearts with immense hope.

This is not a hope born of a desire to return to normal or to life as it was before the pandemic. This has been a period of enormous social trauma but it has also been a period of a great collective soul-searching across society. People have found a fierce appetite for something far better than what had gone before. This is a future shaped by true European values of solidarity, equality, human dignity and democracy. We saw this desire in how Germans sang “Bella Ciao”, the Italian resistance song, in support of the beleaguered Italian people; in how Spaniards clapped health workers on their way into work *cada noche*, every night; and in how households in Ireland put candles in the window to honour all those who have tragically lost their lives.

The peoples of Europe have turned not to individualism, not to private interests but rather full-face to the public good. They recognise that strong public services and a fair economy are essential. There is a lesson in this outpouring of human solidarity and there is inspiration there too, a guide for the road that Europe must now travel. As the desire for fairer societies grows stronger, the European Union cannot simply remain tethered to the past. Seven decades on from the Schuman Declaration, we have an opportunity to reimagine what the European Union can be. We have a chance to respond to citizens' ambition for a better future. Too often the EU has promoted austerity and privatisation, which is an economic model that has failed. Too often the EU has facilitated the transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, from the many to the few.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was launched on Sunday to engage with citizens on how the EU should deal with the challenges facing it, and it is very welcome. The truth is we cannot have more of the same. We must learn from Brexit that many people feel deeply disempowered. This is not all the fault of the EU. Governments often blame the EU for their own policy choices and failures. When the EU promotes the economic model that favours the well-off at the expense of ordinary people, the elites at the expense of citizens, there should be no surprise that people will reject it. This is the discussion we need to have. The European Union must become a vehicle for social progress for the many rather than a vehicle for the enrichment of the few.

We can construct a social Europe in a way in which citizens and member states have a greater say in formulating positive policy positions within the Union. This would be a social Europe of equals, partnership and solidarity, guided by democratic principles and based on the premise that it is by states working together as equals on matters of mutual interest that we can best serve citizens of the EU. I believe that European Union can be a force for good. It can be a champion of peace and human rights all around the world, nowhere less than in the Middle East where the people of Palestine again desperately cry out for international protection and justice.

Right now being a force for good means the EU supporting the intellectual property waiver on Covid-19 vaccines because we are a global community and the fight against this virus is global. We have a humanitarian duty to ensure all the peoples of the world have access to the vaccines they need. This is not only a humane approach but one based on enlightened self and mutual interest.

A progressive Europe must also be to the fore in responding to climate change and in shaping a transition that is truly just. It must lead advancements in workers and union rights. Europe should be a refuge for those in need of help and shelter, not a privileged fortress cut from plight and suffering. A modern Europe should look not to militarisation or federalism but to progress in solving the common challenges of humanity. This is about education for all, housing for all, healthcare for all and prosperity for all. These principles are crucial as Ireland and the EU face the future together.

As the world changes and as we soul-search together to chart a new course, the parallel journeys to a new Europe and a new and united Ireland are powerfully complementary. Irish unity is the very best idea for the future of our island. It is a destination shaped by currents of change that shape lives and history. The pandemic and Brexit have utterly transformed the conversation and debate on Irish reunification. A new and united Ireland within a new social Europe is now a real prospect. Citizens recognise that it makes sense for Ireland in its entirety to be part of the same trading bloc and the same Single Market with the four freedoms that ensue. To be a part of Europe - that is what the people of the North want and that is what the people of the

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South want. To stand still or tread water is no longer an option for leaders in Ireland or Europe. Change is coming and there will be a referendum on Irish unity so the people will have their say. It is all of our jobs to prepare for that and to make the transition to a united Ireland a success for all the people who share this island. Just as with the support for the peace process, the Good Friday Agreement and the securing of the protocol, the EU will have a central role in this.

We are not a nation of little islanders. Ireland's place, North and South, is within a Europe of equals. We will look again, as we have before, to our gallant allies in Europe to continue positively engaging with the process of Irish reunification as we transform our society. We will look to them as we build the all-island economy, all-island public services and an all-island society that is home to all, regardless of background or identity. Unity will be the watershed moment in the history of Ireland and a moment we must seize. Just as both Governments should prepare for unity, the European Union must also prepare for the day that Ireland, in our totality, joins as a united nation. There is no doubt in my mind that a united Ireland would form part of a positive and progressive reshaping of the European dynamic.

In the words of Bob Dylan, the "old road is rapidly aging." The old order is being exposed like never before. We have an opportunity to recast Ireland and Europe on the foundations of equality, hope and economic justice. The future will either be reactionary or revolutionary. Now is the time to confidently step forward with big and ambitious ideas to build a better Europe and a better Ireland. In order to achieve change we have to reach out to people who do not feel represented. From the smallest village to the largest cities, we need to address the real social and economic challenges. We need to empower people and communities and encourage them to take the future into their own hands. We need to give them power to shape the society in which they live.

This is a good vision for how to shape Europe and Ireland in the years that lie ahead. The future of Europe and Ireland's relationship with Europe will be shaped by the decisions we make today. Let us not cling timidly to the past. Let us boldly move forward in partnership, common purpose and common cause. Let us move forward in hope to refound a Europe of social solidarity and a new united Ireland for all of our people.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am delighted to have the opportunity for a short few minutes to speak on the issue of Europe Day. Europe, the political and economic vision of close co-operation and significant integration, has been the major post-Second World War project for most European democracies. Through the steps of the European Common Market and the European Economic Community, EEC, we have achieved a European Union founded on the shared values of tolerance, equality and peace on our Continent. We have a way to go, however.

The expansion of our Union has often been based on political pragmatism. We had the accession of Spain post Franco, Portugal post Salazar and Greece post the colonels. This did not happen because the democratic values in those countries had reached such levels that they could instantly involve themselves in the institutions of the European Union but to bed down democracy. That has been one of the driving forces of the European Union since the Second World War. That is hugely important in ensuring a democratic base in Europe. Even in our lifetime, we have seen in the Balkans what the absence of bedding down that fundamental democracy can mean. That has been significantly undervalued and insufficiently recognised.

The underpinning principles of the European Union are human rights and economic cohesion. I want to say a word about each of those. Human rights are based on equality. The

concept of equality on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race and religion is fundamental. We still have a way to go, even within the European Union, to ensure those values are defended and exported. On economic cohesion, a basic principle was to bring the economic well-being of all of our citizens up to the highest levels. We established the Cohesion Fund for that very purpose, and Ireland has benefited from that fund.

I sometimes listen to commentary about the European Union exporting austerity or being a conservative economic force. In truth, the European Union is what the people of Europe elect it to be. When the European Union had socialists and democrats in dominant positions, at the time of Jacques Delors and others such as Romano Prodi, there was a different vision. At times of crisis, such as during our economic crisis, for example, the dominant political forces have, unfortunately, been conservative, primarily the European People's Party, EPP. That is the reason that conservative approach exists. The European institutions themselves do not have a political flavour. They are determined by whomsoever is elected to government in the member states of the Union. If we want progressive politics, we must elect progressive politicians to achieve that objective.

I will make brief mention of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, which is often criticised. It was created by Sicco Mansholt, a Dutch farmer who remembered the two post-Second World War famines in his country of the Netherlands. He designed an agricultural strategy for Europe to obliterate hunger, which in and of itself is not a mean or poor objective to have for someone who had experienced the famine that ravaged his country in the winter of 1945-46. To ensure that Europe would never go hungry again was a desirable and noble objective.

We must be clear on what Ireland wants or expects of the European Union. Many, including many Members of this House, measure our involvement in a purely transactional term. They ask how much we put in and how much we get back. Brexit is our wake-up call. If we see the European Union as something separate from us, as being over there in Brussels and a place to go for funding or for access to markets or goods, whether it is vaccines or something else, then we miss the fundamental point of Europe. The point of Europe is to build a different concept and politics to ensure peace, prosperity and cohesion, the rule of law and fundamental equality.

Ireland has to help create the European Union. We have done our job to date in all its flaws and complexities. It is a place of democratic stability, rule of law, equality and economic opportunity but we have an awful lot further to go to achieve the objective that each of us can envisage for our Continent as the best possible place to live for our peoples in the future. We have to do it outside the shadow of Britain and be willing to contribute in every sense to make that noble vision a reality.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I am conscious of the fact that today, 11 May, is the 50th anniversary of the death of my grandfather, former Taoiseach Seán Lemass. He was a man who did so much to open up this country and lay the groundwork for accession to the EEC in 1973, as the Taoiseach stated. In that way, it is entirely appropriate that we are having this debate today.

I note that there was a European Council meeting in Portugal last weekend. Under discussion were EU social policies in a post-Covid world. The Council pledged, among other things, that 78% of citizens will be in employment by 2030, 15 million people will be lifted out of poverty and 60% of workers will get training and upskilling every year. This is the EU at its best, a social Europe.

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I welcome the statement issued by President Higgins for Europe Day 2021, along with other European Heads of State. The President referred to the need to reflect on the core multilateral values of the EU institutions and is of the view that the EU should not be seen purely in economic and monetary terms. The EU is not just an economic union, although the Single Market is very important for Irish businesses. The EU has been transformative for Ireland. It has been a force for progressive social and cultural change. It has been responsible for dragging Ireland kicking and screaming initially into the 20th century and now into the 21st century. So many areas of Irish life have been transformed as a result of our membership of the EU, including labour law and the rights of workers, environmental laws, our commitment to tackle climate change and consumer legislation to name but a few. However, there is no room for complacency. The EU is not perfect and there is always room for reform of its institutions.

The economic and financial crash of 2008 and the consequent austerity measures resulted in high unemployment levels, particularly among young people. Inequality became more pronounced. The EU was seen to be imposing these unpopular measures and social cohesion was threatened. Hence the need to ensure the EU should never be a force for the implementation of neoliberal economic policies. The EU is much more than this. It needs to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of all its citizens and liberal democratic values are at its core.

Brexit was a wake up call for us all. Populism and intolerance will flourish when the system is not working. This brings me to rule of law issues and problems in Hungary and Poland in particular. Adherence to democratic values is central to membership of the EU, including fundamental rights, media freedom, free and fair elections, judicial independence and ethics in politics. These values are central to the EU and there can be no backsliding in enforcing these values in member states where it is necessary and by whatever means possible. In particular, the establishment of LGBTI+ zones in Poland is unacceptable and needs to be called out by the EU.

As we know, the Conference on the Future of Europe has been launched. This should cover a wide range of issues, including building a healthy continent post-Brexit, the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness, equality and intergenerational solidarity, Europe's digital transformation and European rights and values, including the rule of law, migration challenges, security, the EU's role in the world, the Union's democratic foundations and how to strengthen democratic processes governing the European Union. These have been outlined by the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, Deputy Thomas Byrne. The range of issues is wide.

The consultation in this country needs to be genuine and engaging and reach as many people as possible, particularly the young. For my part, I do not see any real need for treaty change. I believe the existing treaties have not been fully utilised to deal with the ongoing challenges we face including, for example, public health, of which we are all very much aware during the pandemic. I also believe that we need to ensure the protection of the treaty-guaranteed right to set our own tax rates during this consultation process and when it comes to a conclusion.

Ireland's policy of military neutrality in no way means that we lack solidarity with the EU. Ireland strongly supports international co-operation in ensuring peace and stability in the world and in promoting peace and justice and basic human rights, and we do this through the United Nations and through selected permanent structured co-operation, PESCO, operations among other things.

In December, the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs published a report on the Conference on the Future of Europe which contains a number of recommendations. The main recommendation is that national parliaments need to be very much involved and that we need to find new ways to engage with the citizens in this country, to reach out to them and not just reach out to the usual interest groups and social partners and see whether we can get a really meaningful debate under way. I hope the Government will look at the committee's recommendations as we set about launching the consultation process in this country this week.

I also welcome the launch by the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, of the EU careers strategy. We need to increase Irish representation in the EU institutions and agencies as we face the so-called demographic cliff with the imminent retirement of Irish senior officials. It is an excellent initiative brought forward by the Minister of State and I hope it will reach young people, in particular our graduates and masters students, so they consider a career in the European Union institutions.

As we speak, the EU recovery and resilience fund of €750 billion is under discussion, as is the Brexit adjustment reserve of €5 billion. The House could do with an update on where Ireland stands in the context of these funds at present. Have our plans been submitted? When will the process with regard to these two funds be concluded?

Ireland and Irish citizens continue to show support for the EU. A poll undertaken recently by European Movement Ireland showed that 84% agreed that Ireland should remain part of the EU. This is a significant figure and is at the top of support for the EU among member states. The poll undertaken for European Movement Ireland is well worth studying. It includes many percentages on Europe, the European Union and where we should go. No doubt it will be part of the consultation process on the future of Europe.

We need to see the full implementation of the trade and co-operation agreement between the EU and the UK and the Northern Ireland protocol and make them work. Ireland experienced extraordinary solidarity from our EU partners during the Brexit process in the formulation of the trade and co-operation agreement and, more particularly, in the formulation of the Northern Ireland protocol. It is unfinished work and we need to see both of these implemented and carefully scrutinised in the coming months and years.

It is important that we get the Conference on the Future of Europe up and running in this country and finalise our conclusions so we can plan for the Europe ahead. Europe has brought peace, prosperity and progress to this country, and to Europe as a whole, and this should never be forgotten. It has been the most successful peace process in the history of mankind and this is something we should never take for granted.

The admission of new member states should also be under active consideration. The Taoiseach noted that in 2004 we admitted ten additional member states. It is not a time to pull up the ladder. It is not a time to say we are all right now, everything is grand and we will keep everybody out. We need to be magnanimous and the admission of new nation states, particularly from the Balkans region, would enhance Europe and improve security. Admitting new states is in everyone's interests. People should not be afraid of enlargement, once, of course, all the rules are met by the member states.

I welcome this debate and look forward to listening to the other contributions.

Deputy John Brady: On the back of a century that witnessed two global conflagrations -

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two world wars which led to the slaughter of tens of millions of people - the European project was born out of a design committed to making war not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible. The Europe that emerged out of this search to achieve a peaceful coexistence has allowed the formerly belligerent nations of western Europe to not only coexist, but to prosper in a spirit of mutual dependency. With such success and prosperity comes responsibility.

However, Europeans have differing views as to how this should be allowed manifest itself. Among those at the helm of the political leadership of the EU, there are those who believe that the EU must develop a degree of military muscle and that the EU needs to develop its own independent military capacity. Some suggest that there are already plans in place to send EU forces into Mozambique by the end of this year to protect French mining interests in a gas-rich province. The irony of sending European troops back to what was a former Portuguese colony to preserve European interests is apparently lost on Europe's politicians.

There are those, too, who believe it more incumbent on the European Union to focus on the development of moral muscle. I do not believe that there is any other issue where this absence of moral intent is felt more keenly than on the issue of the plight of the Palestinian people. The International Criminal Court has recently opened an investigation into Israel for war crimes and last week, Human Rights Watch, a reputable and respected international organisation, laid the accusation of gross human rights abuse, that is, the policy of apartheid, at the feet of the Israeli state. The various responses we have witnessed tell their own tale. The EU offered a salutary response possessed of worthy sentiment but little of tangible consequences for Israel for continuing with its abhorrent policy. The Government decided to sit on its hands again and prevaricate, hiding behind Government attempts at deciphering the legal meaning of the word "apartheid". One could argue that there is little time for such niceties when an Israeli army bulldozer is bearing down on one's family home threatening all that one holds dear. Then we have the Israeli response: an arrogant dismissal; followed by an assault on the third holiest site within the religion of Islam, leading to the injury of and assault on hundreds of Palestinians; and an assault on Gaza, with two dozen deaths, including nine children. The EU was quick to impose sanctions on Russia for its actions in Crimea. The time for the Government to sit on its hands is over. It is not a time for words. It is a time for action. At the very least, we need to see the same array of sanctions that were put on Russia being put on the table in this instance, such as the censoring of diplomatic relations, the freezing of assets and travel for individuals directly implicated in illegal Israeli practices, the potential restructuring of EU-Israeli relations, and a restriction of economic co-operation such as would impact on the Horizon Europe 2021-2027 programme.

These are only some of the many actions and options open to both the Government and the EU. Concurrent to this, we need to see the Government take this issue to the UN Security Council as a matter of urgency. We need to call for an emergency session and for the public implementation of all the UN resolutions on Jerusalem and occupied Palestine.

It is critical to note that the Palestinian people are a people marked for complete erasure. The Israeli Government wishes to force them off their land to reduce their existence to disparate groups struggling to survive on a few dozen Bantustans, removing the potential for a two-state solution and condemning what will be left of the Palestinian people to the perpetual state of refugee in what is legally their own country.

The time for the Government to act is now. We do not need more meaningless words. We need action, and action now.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Europe Day is a day celebrating peace and unity. I echo that - a day celebrating peace and unity - given all that is going on in the world, all that we have seen on television screens and all that has been experienced by the people of Palestine, not only over the past 24 hours or the past week, but for many decades. We should be cognisant of talking about how we celebrate a day of peace and unity while 27 people were killed last night, including nine children, but I will talk about Europe.

Europe is often talked about as a peace project. In many ways, it has been a very successful peace project. I am somebody who considers himself, in addition to being a proud Dub and a proud Irish person, a proud European. I believe that Europe, on the whole, has been good for Ireland. When we joined in 1973, Ireland was a predominantly agrarian society more connected to the 19th century than to the 20th century. From 1973 onwards, we accelerated ourselves more into the 21st century and left many of our neighbours and contemporaries in Europe far behind in terms of the type of society that we have created here that is modern, forward-thinking, progressive and outward-looking.

There have been stand-out moments in our relationship with the European Union, the most important of which, for me and for all of us here who value our peace on this island, was the support and solidarity that was given to the Irish people throughout the lead up to the Good Friday Agreement. That will live long in memory. While that peace is still very much a process, the somewhat stability we have on this island is a recognition of that contribution.

In terms of the past 24 months of Ireland's pathway toward and engagement in the withdrawal negotiations as Britain sought to leave the European Union, there is an old saying in international diplomacy that the strong do what they will while the weak suffer what they must. It is fair to say that during the withdrawal negotiations, Ireland's position certainly was not weak. We were able to stare our neighbours in the eye confidently and, I would argue, more strongly and that was due to our relationship with the European Union.

The Taoiseach stated that Europe is not perfect. It is far from perfect. The rate in the European Union of those at risk of poverty or social exclusion stands at 21%. Poverty is the greatest threat to the European Union. When I walk along where we are at present in the heart of what was once - and still is to some degree but not the same way as I remember it - Dublin's docklands, I think about when I used travel with my family on holidays to Pwllheli where we would often go through Holyhead. I often take the ferry and head over to Holyhead. Holyhead is a place that I have lots of great memories of. It was only in later years I learnt that Holyhead and the province of Anglesey where it is located is statistically the poorest part of the United Kingdom. Twenty-two per cent of the children born in Anglesey and Holyhead are at risk of or in poverty. The people of Holyhead chose to vote in favour of Brexit. Despite the fact that they were entirely dependent upon trade and exports for their livelihoods, they still chose Brexit and a shot into the unknown because of a European Union which had moved towards economic principles that were, they felt, and many would agree, strongly against their interests. A shot in the dark was better than the reality of what they were experiencing.

Poverty is the greatest threat to the European Union. The European Union has too often turned its back on the real-life experiences of those who have resided within its borders. A fruit of that poison orchard for me is what is seen in the rise of the far right. People manipulating communities who have been to the fore of collectivism and telling them that other people were the cause of their ills while being backed up by powerful forces within the European Union is a poison fruit of that orchard. I utterly refuse, however, to accept that the same communities,

which are always to the forefront of embracing collectivism, which have been the ones who were the first in terms of accepting diversity and welcoming in people from foreign shores, be they fleeing persecution or simply looking to build a better life for themselves or their families, are the ones who have been advancing this hatred within the European Union; far from it. It is people in positions of power and influence such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary or those in Poland whose far-right principles have been accommodated, to some degree, in terms of their denigration of LGBT+ communities and their efforts to lobby to remove gender equality from EU statements. We must condemn and confront the far right, wherever it may be, whether on the streets or in the European Parliament.

I echo the sentiment already expressed that while Europe Day is a day celebrating peace and unity, there can be absolutely no peace and unity if the EU refuses to take a position of strength in calling what is happening in Israel, Jerusalem and the occupied territories exactly what it is, which is an annexation. It needs to be called that; otherwise the EU's claim to be a Union built on peace and unity is a fraud. We cannot put a fortress around our own peace and unity and commend ourselves on 9 May every year while people in the occupied territories in Palestine are being bombed. The median age of the population in the Gaza Strip is 17 years and seven months. When the Government of Israel chooses to drop bombs on the Gaza Strip, it is willingly killing children. If the European Union, and Ireland as a member state, are not willing to call that out and stand against that injustice in the strongest possible terms, then the very purpose of the Union is rendered obsolete. I call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Taoiseach to take the strongest line on this and to call this annexation for what it is. Ireland must use its power, position and influence to condemn, in the fullest terms, the Government of Israel for its treatment of the Palestinian people. We must say "No more", draw a line in the sand and demonstrate fortitude on this issue.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I have always considered myself a European. From early on, it was part of my self-definition. I was an Irish citizen first and foremost and within that, there are local and tribal loyalties like the address lines on an envelope marking townland, parish, county but in the wider frame, I am a European, a member of the European Economic Community as it was and, now, of the European Union. I have been a beneficiary of the four freedoms in a Europe without borders, particularly the right of free movement of people. I have worked in Germany and Italy without hindrance or impediment. Indeed, I was in Italy for the change-over to the euro in 2002. In Ireland, we had cashed in our punts by the end of the first week in January whereas the Italians clung to their beloved lira right up to the six-week deadline, a small anecdotal measure of the high regard we have for the European project in Ireland.

We are one of the most pro-EU member states, according to Eurobarometer polling. We have seen and felt the improvements in our own country derived from our membership of the EU, socially, economically and environmentally. It is to our shame that progress in this country on social and environmental issues has often come at the insistence of Europe rather than through leadership on our own part from this House. I refer, for example, to the water framework directive and the general data protection regulation, GDPR, which is among the most important and robust EU legislation in the last decade.

We have also known peace here in our own country and across the EU and have experienced a period of relative stability, free from warfare. Europe had torn itself asunder for centuries and the European project emerged from the smouldering ruins of a continent that self-immolated through two world wars of almost unthinkable savagery. I am sure Robert Schuman has been much quoted already today. He was a pragmatic dreamer who understood that there can be

power in the prosaic. He argued that Europe would be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity. In 1998, John Hume acknowledged the European Union as “the best example in the history of the world of conflict resolution”. He argued that the peoples of Europe “had created institutions which respected their diversity ... but allowed them to work together in their common and substantial economic interest. They spilt their sweat and not their blood and by doing so broke down the barriers of distrust of centuries and the new Europe has evolved and is still evolving, based on agreement and respect for difference”. Both men knew that the European Union was not an inevitability but a conscious and creative act of the imagination, rooted in the practical and pragmatic pursuit of a shared common good underpinned by respect and a tolerance for our differences. We are both the same and different and it is in our diversity and solidarity that we are strong. However, our union is not inevitable and I wonder if we are forgetting that through long habituation. In Hungary we see sustained pressure on democratic institutions, civil society and the rule of law, while in Poland there has been a crackdown on LGBTQI+ rights, attacks on independent media and a near total ban on access to abortion in January of this year. Our closest neighbour, with which we have the longest and deepest cultural ties, has chosen to leave the European Union. Much of the debate in the referendum and the subsequent fallout was tinged with nationalist rhetoric and a focus on borders.

To my mind, the European project is as essential today as ever and we must re-engage in a conscious way with that continuous and creative process of making and remaking our shared European identity. If the European Union has been a force to the good for human rights and workers’ rights within our borders, which it has been in the main, then let us fiercely defend those advancements and seek to project them beyond our borders. In our trade agreements with others, let us insist on due diligence when it comes to human rights and insist that the intrinsic dignity of the person is preserved in the supply chains of those products we allow into our markets. Let us vindicate the UN’s sustainable development goals here in Europe and work in partnership with governments in the developing world to help them do the same. In the immediate term and in the teeth of this pandemic, let us use every lever, including the sharing of materials, manufacturing knowledge and intellectual property, to accelerate the global vaccine roll-out and safeguard us all from the prospect of vaccine escape. Let us face up to our shared responsibility as one of the most developed parts of the globe to deal with the existential threat of biodiversity and climate breakdown. The European Union, and Ireland as a member state, must achieve and exceed its climate ambitions and, in doing so, support a just transition to a climate neutral economy in Europe and further afield. This can and should be the practical and pragmatic project that binds us as a union to the common good for another 70 years and more. Let us continue to invest in that collective act of the imagination that allows me to call myself a European citizen.

Deputy Matt Carthy: My experiences of Europe Day have been a bit strange. I must admit that before I was an MEP, I did not even know that such a thing existed. When I was in the European Parliament I often found it bizarre that European institutions treated the day as if it was being marked on every street corner and in every community centre in each member state. MEPs would gather in Strasbourg where the EU flag was flown everywhere, including a massive one unfurled at the centre of the Hemicycle and Beethoven’s Ode to Joy, which somebody decided was the EU’s anthem, would blare out across the sound system before speakers from each institution would rise and decry nationalism. It was a surreal experience that was far removed from the reality of the citizens across member states who, on that day, were simply getting on with their lives. Many were struggling and I suspect, like the pre-MEP me, the majority were unaware that it was a day that the great and good expected them to mark. That experience

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was a good reflection of the European institutions which all too often are far removed from the communities, workers and families affected by their decisions.

The European Union has delivered much that should be celebrated. It has established universal rights and embedded peace among its members. The Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, has created an open market that has sustained many farming communities in Ireland and across Europe.

The cohesion policy has diverted infrastructure resources to regions that were long neglected by national governments. The role the EU played in supporting the Irish peace process is something we are all grateful for.

The people of Ireland want to be part of the European Union. We saw that most recently in the Six Counties when a majority voted to remain part of the European Union against a Brexiteer agenda that was led by the right and the Tories in Britain. In recognising the Irish people's wish to be part of the European Union, it is important to also recognise some of the deeply worrying flaws and moves the European Union is currently taking. Just last week, Members of the European Parliament voted to endorse €7.9 billion as part of the next multi-annual financial framework, MFF, going towards a so-called European defence fund. In reality, that fund is a massive subsidy taken from the peoples of Europe to go to the European arms industry. I am not sure any ordinary citizen in Europe believes that is the correct way to spend money.

At the end of the next MFF, we in this country will contribute an additional €1 billion per annum to the European Union budget but we will get less back in the most important EU programmes, those that made the Union popular in the first place. There will be less money coming back to Ireland in the Common Agricultural Policy and very little money coming back in cohesion funding. Instead, every single line in the EU budget is facilitating and creating the wherewithal for the EU arms industry to draw down even more money than the €7.9 billion allocation. Some estimates suggest upwards of €15 billion from the next seven-year financial programme could end up in the hands of that industry. That is not the Europe Irish people want.

The days in which the EU can celebrate itself as a peace process will be numbered unless the European Union at every level, including our Government, takes a stand on behalf of the people of Palestine. The state of Israel, which is recognised as an apartheid, rogue state that is trampling on the human rights and lives of the Palestinian people, is considered a favoured nation by the EU. That needs to change. Today is a day for reflecting on the positives but it must also be a day on which we collectively determine that we will create a better EU and that Ireland will ensure that the EU delivers for citizens rather than corporations and arms companies.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Earlier, the Taoiseach said that what defined the European Union was that it is an institution based on the idea of rules-based international co-operation. He argued that the European Union is a bulwark against extremism. Let us test that proposition against the EU's relationship with Israel on the day that Israel is, once again, committing war crimes in Gaza. As we speak, it is launching missiles which have claimed the lives of 28 innocent people in Gaza in the last 24 hours, including ten children. One of the dead was due to marry the day after tomorrow. This is indiscriminate murder of civilians. As we speak, Benjamin Netanyahu is saying that he has no intention of stopping. What did the European Union do? We heard words of sympathy and condemnation but no action against war crimes by the rogue state of Israel.

What preceded the current missile strikes against Gaza? If one believes the false narrative about what goes on between Israel and the Palestinians, one is encouraged to believe this is some intractable conflict between two sides that, for some reason, cannot get on with one another. That is not the truth about Israel. What preceded this latest flare-up was the attempt to evict and ethnically cleanse – let us use the correct term – 28 families from the Sheikh Jarrah area of Jerusalem in order to replace those Palestinian families with illegal Jewish settlers. It is an attempt to evict them, take their homes and put other people in those homes. It is worth stating that those families in that area are now going to be double refugees because they came to Sheikh Jarrah after being ethnically cleansed from Haifa and Jaffa in 1948.

In the year the Israeli state was founded and in one of the most barbaric acts of ethnic cleansing seen in the 20th century, close to 1 million people were expelled by Zionist terror gangs from their homes and villages and driven to the West Bank. They were left to fend for themselves and it was only later that the United Nations helped them build refugee camps and new homes. Now, they are being evicted again contrary to law and international rules, which the EU is supposed to uphold. They are doing it again. During the holy month of Ramadan, Palestinians were blocked from going on to the Temple Mount in an orchestrated, premeditated military action by the Israel authorities in order to provoke the Palestinians while they continued the campaign of illegal settlements and ethnic cleansing. Annexation is much too nice a word for it. This is ethnic cleansing. What is happening in Gaza today is a crime against humanity. It is a crime against humanity that, on an ongoing, systematic and orchestrated basis, Israel continues to ethnically cleanse the Palestinians, as it has done since the beginning of the state in 1948. People need to understand that. In Ireland, more than ever, we should know of the need to show our affinity with the Palestinians and move beyond words of concern to action.

I wonder whether people know that in 1936, the military governor of Jerusalem, Sir Ronald Storrs, explained what the plan was for the Israeli state, which was to be set up in 1948. He was the first military governor general since Pontius Pilate, sent in as part of the Sykes–Picot carve-up of the Middle East and the Balfour Declaration, which was to support the plan for the new state that Britain would support. How did he describe the Israeli state they were planning to build? He said that “we want to build a little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism”. Balfour, who had signed the declaration, and Herbert Samuel, another of the main figures, had been involved in Ireland in suppressing land protests in the late 19th century. Samuel interned 2,000 people after 1916 and oversaw the hanging of Roger Casement. He and Balfour went on to become senior figures in mandate Palestine, planning the establishment of the Israeli state, the partition of Palestine and the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians in order to create a loyal little Jewish Ulster amidst a sea of potential hostile Arabism. In other words, it was for the great powers to control the Middle East at the expense of the Palestinians and causing decades of conflict, division, murder, tyranny, the denial of democracy and all the horrors the Palestinians and people of the Middle East have had to suffer.

Who is Israel’s biggest trading partner? It is the European Union. Last year, the EU and Israel did €31 billion worth of trade. All the weasel words and words of sympathy from European leaders, when they do nothing about the murderous criminal activity that Israel is engaged in, are hollow and the Taoiseach’s premise that the European Union is a rules-based international guardian is nonsense.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important debate 71 years on from the Schuman Declaration, when Robert Schuman put a very simplistic idea to the people of Europe at a time when they needed simplistic ideas, sensitivity and a vi-

sion. That vision has stood the test of time. It is a vision which, unfortunately, in this Parliament and in parliaments across the European Union, we very rarely discuss. In fact, it is quite clear that for many people across the EU, the best thing to do is use Europe as a handy punching bag. The lessons about doing so can be seen just across the Irish Sea, when we look at what our friends and cousins in Great Britain have been left with. Over 40 years of continuous lies and misinformation about the European project has led to the UK being pulled out of the European Union on the basis of yet more lies and deceit. Even now, when the UK has left the EU, the lies and deceit continue. One just has to pick up a particular British newspaper on any day to see a ridiculous headline about the EU. It might be about Covid vaccines, taxation or anything else. If in doubt, kick the EU. That is a lesson for all of us because it is something in which we engage far too much in this country.

We have a remarkable opportunity to contribute to a lengthy debate and to pull in many issues that are pertinent to so many people in Ireland, in jurisdictions across the European Union and in the countries it deals with every day. How often do we have these debates? Once a year. How many times leading up to the Brexit process did we talk about European issues? Brexit happened and all of a sudden we had to talk about it on a daily basis because we realised that the EU and everything that emanates from Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg comes into every aspect of our lives. That is why we cannot simply talk about the EU during referendums or in the context of occasional annual declarations.

It was disappointing that on Sunday, our national broadcaster - which employs one of Europe's finest journalists, who has covered the European Union for over a decade and is lauded across EU member states - did not take a single moment in either of its news bulletins to talk about the Conference on the Future of Europe, which was being launched by the President of the European Commission that day. We say that people are removed from the European process and do not engage with it, but we are not talking about the biggest ever conversation involving European citizens that will happen over the next 12 months. We love throwing out negativity and misinformation but we do not necessarily play our part in ensuring that real, meaningful discussions happen about the future of the European Union. The future of the European Union matters a lot to every single person across this island, not just in this jurisdiction.

The Conference on the Future of Europe could have so many possibilities but I fear that two things might happen. One is that it could become the plaything of the European Union institutions, the Commission, the Members of the European Parliament and the Council, and become a detached exercise in navel-gazing. The second is that our member states, be it their national governments, parliaments or citizenry, might not engage with the process. We could have a Conference on the Future of Europe that discusses institutional issues rather than the practical issues that matter to everyday life. We in this country, and our friends in the UK, have seen what happens when the practical issues on which the EU impacts are on the line. We know what it means when people start talking about borders and checks and veterinary legislation. We need to talk about the practical things that affect us.

The generation that went before us knew what it was to struggle in the European process and they knew what life was like before Ireland joined the EEC nearly 50 years ago this week. Today, we take for granted the world's most successful peace project, and all we do is hammer on about the supposed militarisation of the European Union. The security and protection of citizens is not equivalent to a military project. It is disappointing that people look at something that makes up 1% or 2% of the EU's seven-year budget and focus solely on that rather than on the priorities that matter for practical life on an everyday basis. There are things people can

do today that they simply could not do 20 years ago. The EU has played a role in making sure our food and air are safe, our water is clean, our citizens' rights are protected, that we retain our freedom of movement and can live, work, travel and study in any one of the 27 member states, as well as many other states with which the European Union is in agreement.

When Brexit happened, Irish exporters and businesses still had the opportunity to sell to the world's largest economic bloc. When we joined the EEC in 1973, 55% of our exports went to the UK. That figure is down to 11%. The social progress this country has enjoyed in parallel with our membership of the European Union should never be forgotten. We cannot take these things for granted or be allowed to forget about them or the important role the European Union plays in all our lives. That is what people did in the UK for far too long.

When talking about the future of Europe and reflecting on the 71 years since Robert Schuman's remarkable speech, we must ask what big achievements and challenges the European Union will lead the way on in the next decade or two. Why is it that when people talk about the EU they fumble for achievements and then say it is great that roaming charges have been abolished? One cannot compare roaming charges to decades of peace, freedom of movement or the vitally important opportunities and safeties given to Irish citizens. That is why I look positively on the opportunities before the European Union today, which we in this Oireachtas should be playing our part to feed into.

We talk about things like the post-Covid response. Remarkable decisions were taken by the European Union in its budgetary response, through coronabonds and eurobonds and by putting funding in place that will allow this jurisdiction to economically and socially lift itself out of the malaise of this pandemic in due course. Of course, the vaccine roll-out is a handy stick with which to beat the EU and we heard Government backbench Deputies doing so a month or two ago. In the wake of a bye-election, the British Prime Minister said the UK's success in that regard was all because they are out of the European Union, when that has absolutely nothing to do with it. We should be very clear. The European vaccination programme, which is kicking into gear across this State at the moment, would not be available to us as a small state outside the European Union. We need to be honest with ourselves. We are very good at putting everything down and looking for the negatives but, while there are lessons to be learned from the Covid response within the EU, when we compare ourselves with the rest of the world, there are achievements as well.

We are having this discussion 49 years after a referendum took place in this jurisdiction about whether we should join the EEC. Two political parties at the time, namely, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, backed that referendum and it was backed by 83% of the Irish population. Last week, an opinion poll from European Movement Ireland showed that 84% of Irish citizens support remaining in the EU. That is remarkable. Nearly 50 years on, the numbers are essentially the same. That is not always reflected in the dialogue in this Parliament or in the discussions in the media. We like to look at all the focused, small issues. People try to use the European Union as a scapegoat for things like agricultural inspections or restrictions that are in place to protect people and support our economy and society.

The problem is that people go down the rabbit hole of misinformation, disinformation and taking things for granted. I am not saying the EU is perfect but why is it that every time the EU faces a challenge, the commentariat says that that challenge will define the EU? They always ask whether the EU will survive it. No one has ever questioned whether the United States or the German Federal Republic would survive something. Yet, every conversation is about whether

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a stand-off between Germany and France over budgetary measures could pave the way for the end for the EU, or whether Ireland is going to be picked on. People say again and again, on social media or wherever, that Ireland is going to be thrown under the bus. For five years we heard repeatedly that the German car manufacturers and Italian Prosecco makers were going to throw Ireland under the bus but it never happened.

We consume an awful lot of British media in this State, both broadcast and print. They have some of the finest journalists in the world. However, we are far too reliant on consuming the shock headlines and clickbait about straight bananas, blue passports and all these great things. We are better than that, in Ireland and in this Oireachtas. We use every opportunity we have, be that during post- or pre-European Council statements, the annual reflection on Europe Day, or when engaging with a European Commissioner before a committee, to give the EU a kick and blame Brussels for the decisions being made in this country, which we are required to make. This is what we must really focus on if we are going to talk about the future of Europe. We must talk about how in this State our relationship with Europe is not necessarily a healthy one. Even though we are so pro-European, and when we have needed solidarity we have received it, we just love giving the EU the kick. Why? We do it because it is easy and it gives us somewhere else to allocate the blame. We had a very thoughtful opening speech from the Taoiseach. I listened in intently. He touched on the history regarding when we have needed Europe, it has been there for us.

Crucially, however, what we must touch on as well is the future and I hope the Minister replying will focus on it. Ireland's future is in the EU. Ireland is Europe. It has been good to us and it is about time, when we reflect on those debates and discussions, that we talk perhaps about the meaningful issues and how we can improve them, without always looking for the scapegoat.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Europe has a history of civilisation, invention and innovation, but also a history of vicious colonial powers, wars and a balance of power that was maintained through threat of war and mass armaments. The EU project itself was born out of the end of a genocidal world war. The EU has played its part in changing the nature of relationships across Europe. It has played a vital role in the development of our own peace process. I must commend the solidarity shown to Ireland throughout the entirety of the Brexit negotiations and the ongoing difficulties.

There have obviously been difficulties regarding the vaccine roll-out, but the attempts at solidarity across the entire EU are to be commended, combined with improved operational oversight, involving the Commission and Commissioner Thierry Breton. We have raised with him previously the issue of global solidarity concerning the vaccine roll-out, but we have now seen the President of the United States, Joe Biden, support the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, TRIPS, agreement waiver. I accept there is a wider conversation regarding intellectual property rights. What we need, however, is a best-case fix to ensure a global health solution. We have all said this before: none of us is safe until all of us are safe.

The EU Commission has engaged in a substantial amount of work in dealing with pharmaceutical companies regarding partnership agreements to deliver increased amounts of vaccines. We must ensure this continues and that whatever needs to be done must be done to ensure maximum delivery for the entire globe and that costs are not prohibitive for those in the developing world. There would be no better sign of an EU working for its people and for all people. Many of us have stated in this Chamber the utter madness of Brexit, but this weekend we saw spec-

tacular results in the Scottish elections from the perspective of people looking to achieve their independence within an EU framework. Our congratulations should go to Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish National Party, SNP.

Within this context, we must remember that the majority of people in the North voted to stay within the EU in respect of the Brexit debate. This Brexit debate has catapulted the conversation in respect of Irish unity on this island and in the EU. We have seen the chaos Brexit has brought. We must ensure we have the requisite conversations and do the necessary planning in that regard. I commend the work of many European politicians, including our own Chris MacManus, MEP, in ensuring when the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, TCA, deal was done that a resolution was added in respect of ensuring Northern representation. We must ensure that goes from just being nice words into a concrete result. We cannot have a democratic deficit for those who obviously will be impacted by the Irish protocol and by the rules of the EU. Therefore, they must have a voice, and we must ensure that happens. Europe has a major part to play in respect of connectivity, so we need the conversation to continue and we must ensure we are not wanting here in allowing for aviation connectivity, combined with ensuring that health measures are followed. I would like to think we would do the heavy lifting on antigen testing and anything else that may be required to free us from the situation we are in.

I commend the Ballymurphy families who got an element of justice today. It would be remiss of me not to say that we really need the European Union and the Irish Government to stand up for the rights of the Palestinian people who are being absolutely slaughtered by a war criminal-led Israeli Government that seems to operate as if it were a schoolyard bully that does not realise the disparity between itself and the Palestinians. Land has been annexed, families have been evicted and people have been oppressed for far too long. We must use our seat on the UN Security Council and we must also ensure that the Irish Government and the EU do their utmost. That is how apartheid was broken in South Africa.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Glaoim ar an Teachta Cathal Berry.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I am delighted to be here to speak on Europe Day as a member of the Regional Group. Ireland joined the European project in 1973. I was born in 1977 and as such I am one of Ireland's lucky generations really. We were the first generation to be born within the European Union, the first generation to benefit fully from its membership and the first generation to witness first-hand the transition from national poverty and despair to at least some measure of national prosperity and hope. My generation did not have to read about Ireland in the 1980s, we lived through it, and through economic depression, mass unemployment, mass emigration and armed conflict. Thankfully, that is a country which is now unrecognisable from the one we know and love today. This transition did not happen by chance, however. Mindful of our past, I am also acutely aware of what could have been and what would have been our alternative future had we chosen otherwise and if we had not opted to engage with the European process and be rescued from our collective predicament and our particular circumstances. We should never, ever forget that.

Despite all its shortcomings and well-known imperfections, therefore, the European project has been an overwhelmingly positive journey for this country and this Continent. Let me tell the House why. First, Europe is now at peace for the first time in centuries. How ironic it is that this Continent, which used to be the very origin of so many global conflicts, has reinvented itself to be an exemplar of respect and a beacon of hope and stability throughout the world. Countries are now clamouring to get in, and for good reason. Again, this process has not hap-

pened by chance. This progress has been brought about by the promotion of dialogue and good governance and respect for human rights and the rule of law. Having lived in countries that do not enjoy these benefits, I assure the House that we should never, ever take them for granted, not for one second, for they are privileges bestowed on few and freedoms that others can only dream of. One only has to observe the current difficulties in Northern Ireland as a result of the complications caused by Brexit to appreciate the involvement and positive influence of the European Union.

Second, from an education perspective, the European Union has had a transformative effect. Multiple infrastructure, education and research grants provided to our schools and universities have greatly improved the educational experience of our young people. The Erasmus programme alone has benefited tens of thousands of Irish students since its inception decades ago. It has promoted tolerance, understanding, cultural awareness and respect for diversity. I am heartened to see that the Erasmus programme is going to continue for students in Northern Ireland. That is a very positive development that I approve of immensely.

Third, the support provided by the European Union during the recent Brexit negotiations is also worthy of particular mention. When one contrasts the conduct and behaviour of both negotiating teams, I am very glad of which side we have chosen to align ourselves with, for one side was cavalier and reckless and the other was constructive and consistent. The outcome was the best possible result for Ireland, given the circumstances forced upon us against our will. Our European partners have once again shown they are reliable colleagues and the accommodation reached regarding Northern Ireland proves they are acutely aware of the particular sensitivities on this island and will continue to support us in future. Of course, it has not all been plain sailing and good news. While I understand that the European project is still a work in progress, more needs to be done to address a number of areas. First, Ireland is still reeling from the after-shocks from the years of austerity imposed on it not by the IMF, but by the EU institutions. At least we can see from the response to the current crisis that they are willing to learn from their mistakes. They are recognising this crisis to be the natural disaster that it is, rather than just an economic recession. Instead of imposing austerity, they are providing liquidity to protect economies and societies and get us through this catastrophe, which is progress of sorts, at least.

Second, the four freedoms of the EU in respect of goods, services, capital and people have yet to be fully realised, in particular, the freedom to establish and provide services. We should be able to purchase insurance policies from companies in France or mortgages from companies in Germany to foster competition in this country, reduce the cost of living and improve quality of life. On the Continent, the costs of mortgages and insurance policies are half what they are here. Therefore, much more work is required to be done in this area.

Third, while the EU has shown significant leadership in tackling the problem of climate change with the European Green Deal, more needs to be done to ensure a just transition for Ireland to move to a carbon-neutral society. As there simply is not the money available to retrofit all homes, electrify all vehicles, provide renewable energy sources and support our farmers, more financial supports are required from Brussels to support this just transition.

To conclude, if there are deficiencies in the European Union, they are not its deficiencies alone, for the shortcomings are as much our fault as that of the EU. The European Union is not some obscure entity far away in Brussels - it is us. We are the European Union, with the ability to shape and remake it as we see fit. We must engage more. I am happy to see the recently announced initiative encouraging increased representation of Irish people in the various

institutions.

What does the future hold for the European Union? I look forward to the likely return of Scotland in the not-too-distant future and in time, the Union's expansion into the Balkans and beyond. Unfinished business remains in tackling inequality, the climate emergency and addressing the challenge of ultranationalism. This country should become more involved, engaged and interested in the project. As a small, open economy and society, our future belongs in Europe and it is therefore very much in our interest to shape it as we see fit.

Deputy James O'Connor: Today marks the 50th anniversary of the death of former Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, who was pivotal in creating an open, inclusive, and dynamic Ireland at the heart of Europe.

Such forward and progressive thinking is again required. Ireland at the heart of Europe can play a leading role in building back a more inclusive and sustainable society. We know this to be particularly to be true in Ireland, as a small open economy at the most westerly point of the EU. Ireland must do all that it can to remain a leading example of how to attract and grow business and be a welcoming place for tourism around the world. We must not isolate or cut ourselves off from the rest of Europe or the wider world. The pandemic has created a sense of inward-looking obsession, which has been damaging to both our economy and society. Thankfully, with the vaccination programme under way, we now need to ensure that Ireland remains at the heart of Europe.

International travel across the EU is vital for Ireland. This week's Irish aviation financial and traffic statistics are extremely worrying for a sector which needs to be at the heart of our economic recovery. The Government must bring industry leaders together to implement recommendations for the safe reopening of international travel. Air traffic decline of over 700,000 flights over the past 12 months is equal to the entire air traffic handled in this country in 1998. I welcome the announcement of the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, in the Seanad on Friday that the Government is committed to the digital green certificate proposal from the EU that would enable a return to EU-wide international travel. Every effort must be made to achieve the alignment of travel policy across the EU to prepare for the opening of travel again. It is vital that we have a common framework for the issuance, verification and acceptance of certificates relating to vaccination, testing and recovery. Ireland must make sure that it is not left behind. As the EU is home to many of the world's leading tech companies, Ireland should be leading the way in the development and execution of a digital green certificate.

A return to international travel is vital to the recovery of Ireland's aviation sector and the wider tourism sector in Ireland. Too many livelihoods are at stake if we fail to act. Aviation was one of our economy's strongest performing sectors before Covid-19, with over 140,000 livelihoods being sustained by the industry in this country. We must protect and rebuild post Covid. The aviation sector helped to get us out of the last recession due to its huge economic contribution to our economy. If it does not survive, we will suffer the consequences.

Passenger numbers at Cork Airport, for example, fell by over 95% during lockdown compared to the same period last year. Air traffic is not expected to recover to 2019 levels until 2024. Cork Airport is Ireland's second largest international airport with 2.4 million passengers passing through it in 2018. The airport offers more than 50 routes to destinations in the UK, Europe, and the United States. Such a loss would not only be a huge blow to jobs in the region but to connectivity throughout the south east and the south of the country more generally.

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Progress is being made at an EU level. The European Parliament adopted its mandate on 29 April 2021 and the Parliament and the European Council commenced negotiations this week. I was also delighted to read in *The New York Times* on Sunday that American tourists who have been fully vaccinated against Covid-19 will be able to visit the European Union over the summer, according to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. I must say that it is of critical importance for the Government here in the Republic of Ireland to do all it can to allow the safe reopening of transatlantic travel in alignment with many of our European neighbours in the Schengen area. Obviously, the fact that Ireland is part of the common travel area has presented us with some minor difficulties, which could be dealt with, in my opinion. It is critical that the Government does this.

The fast pace of vaccination in the United States and advanced talks between its authorities and the European Union over how to make vaccine certificates acceptable as proof of immunity for visitors, will enable the European Commission to recommend a switch in policy that could see transatlantic leisure travel restored. This is huge news for Ireland, rural Ireland and the hospitality sector in this country, as vaccinated tourists from America represent huge economic opportunities for tourism, hospitality and aviation. The Government must provide a clear road-map before the end of May on inbound tourism.

It was heartening to see the level of solidarity among the EU member states in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are stronger together than apart. By working together, we achieve more than on our own.

The next generation EU recovery plan will enable Ireland to put the necessary funding in place to make the country a greener and more digital place in which to live, raise a family and do business. There is a huge level of supports available to grow and develop our economy. We need to grab this opportunity to shape a bold vision for Ireland's future. The time for action is now. In terms of funding, Ireland is set to receive an estimated €1 billion in recovery and resilience facility grants. There will also be €89 million available in 2021 under REACT-EU package and €77 million from the just transition fund. It will include specific supports for sectors that are important to Ireland's economy, such as agriculture, to secure food supplies and protect the income of farmers. Ireland will also receive almost €1.2 billion in cohesion policy allocations from the latest long-term EU budget, as well as over €8.3 billion in direct payments from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund. There will also be €2.25 billion available through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. The European Commission recently disbursed €2.47 billion in financial support to Ireland as a first transfer under the support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency, SURE, scheme. The support will be provided in the form of loans granted on favourable terms and will assist Ireland in covering the costs related to the temporary Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme, which has been a critical income supplement for many people in this country. The Commission has approved two Irish schemes worth €10 million and €7 million for Ireland's coach tourism and entertainment sectors, which were badly hit by the pandemic. It has also approved a €45 million Irish scheme to support companies active in the beef sector and a €60 million Irish scheme to support SMEs affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Ireland will also be the largest recipient of the €5 billion Brexit adjustment fund, which is significantly good news for this country.

I come from a farming background, as I have often discussed in the House. It is critical for the European Union, on a day such as today, to understand that agriculture has a critical role to play in our economy in the Republic of Ireland. Many of our farmers, particularly in the dairy sector, are engaged in some of the most sustainable practices on the planet in terms of how they

treat their animals. Their stock is reared in grass-fed settings on many farms in the country, which is something of which dairy farmers are particularly proud. It is something that differentiates us from much of the competition on the international stage and helps us to develop markets for our produce both within and outside the European Union.

In regard to the cutbacks in herd numbers that may come in the future, internationally and in Ireland, I encourage the EU to take a more sensible approach. It should look at countries where animals are kept indoors all year around as the places to cut back, not places like Ireland where farmers engage in incredibly sustainable practices that are very well researched. It should consider that in an economy such as ours, agriculture plays an enormous role in terms of economic investment in rural communities and the rural economy in its entirety. In my constituency, there are tens of thousands of people who are supported by the agrifood sector, whether they are working in places like Kerrygold, on the distilling side with Jameson, or, at a primary level of the economy, directly on farms. I know many Deputies in Munster and south Leinster are dealing with similar circumstances in their own areas. The agrifood sector really is one of the world-leading parts of our economy and we must do everything we can to protect it. I accept that, from a sustainability point of view, it is important that we find new ways to incentivise farmers financially to engage in more sustainable practices to help the climate, internationally and on a European level. However, this needs to be led from the top down, at Government and at European level. It is enormously important that we keep that in mind.

I have already mentioned the aviation sector. I reiterate that I am exceptionally worried about Ireland's speed of development in terms of the digital green certificates and how well connected we are going to be to the entirety of the European Union over the next couple of months. There are many thousands of people vaccinated in Ireland who would love to re-engage in international travel when it is deemed safe to do so. We seem to be a little behind our European colleagues in terms of how we are going to deal with this particular issue. It must be addressed as quickly as possible because it is critical to balanced regional development in this country. I am thinking of the airport in Cork, where a great deal of enormously positive work has been done in recent times. I am also thinking of our major international airport in Dublin.

Having transatlantic options and the European Union becoming, once again, a major host of North American tourism are of critical importance to the constituency of every Deputy. According to some hoteliers to whom I have spoken, up to 75% of their revenue comes from guests from the US and those guests account for 65% of bookings. This shows that US customers are an incredibly important part of tourism in this country. We need to move in lockstep with our European colleagues to ensure hospitality gets the strongest possible reopening later this year. That will be beneficial not just to the hospitality sector but also to the aviation sector. I have pointed out in the House before that 140,000 jobs in Ireland are supported by aviation. The sector is enormously important and it needs to play a firm and significant role in the economic recovery of this country in the post-Covid era.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am sharing time with Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Mattie McGrath.

Last Sunday, 9 May, the member states of the European Union celebrated Europe Day. This year, the day took on a special dimension with the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe. In the context of the fatigue of the pandemic and the longing for stability and predictability, Europe has entered a crisis stage. Crisis fatigue has now become a widespread sentiment in Europe, especially in Ireland. Evidence in replies to a series of parliamentary questions

from my office confirms that the Government blindly supported the EU negotiation mandate in respect of the Brexit negotiations on fishing, giving away 25% of our pelagic fish. Here we are again now, with the so-called weighing debacle leaving every fisher and processor up and down the country shocked. Another European rule was thrown in on top of us and the Government accepted it.

The mismanagement of this entire debacle is adding to the anti-European sentiment in our country. On face value, it is an act of madness to throw the fisheries industry into turmoil in the space of one hour. On 16 April at 4 p.m., the industry was told that everything was normal. At 5 p.m., nothing was normal and a new regime was in place. This is not acceptable behaviour from the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA. Earlier today, representatives of the SFPA told the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine that they are in negotiations with the industry, but representatives of the industry told the committee it knew nothing about this. We are being misled. I asked the Taoiseach to set time aside today to debate the weighing issue but he ignored my call. Ireland has the most regulated fishing industry in the world because of the EU insistence on trying to squeeze Irish fishermen out of the seas. It is astonishing that the Government is assisting it to do so instead of getting Europe to back off Irish fishermen and give them a chance to survive.

Achieving that will not be an easy thing at this stage. We see how the European bureaucrats enjoy the comfort and conformity of weak Governments such as this Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party Government. That weakness allows the unelected bureaucrats who roam the corridors in Brussels to dictate issues that impact on Irish people on a daily basis. The world will be different after this pandemic. In that new world, it is crucial that the European Union does not leave ordinary people and rural communities like those in Ireland behind. It is important that our Government stands up for the best interests of citizens when exchanging views on this issue.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this very important matter. There is no doubt in the world but that we have benefited magnificently from Europe over the past 40 to 50 years. However, we are now at a crossroads and we may no longer get as much out of Europe as we would like. We are getting a lot of dictation and directives that are hurting people, including farmers and working-class communities. The climate change directives are pushing our society towards a radically different future that will make many of our citizens in rural Ireland poorer, as well as people right across the country and in the rest of Europe. That is my considered opinion.

We are hearing a lot of talk at present about reducing the dairy herd. Deputies in this House have pointed out that Irish farmers produce the best milk in a cleaner and more efficient way than do many of the factory farmers in Europe. Irish farmers feed their cattle on green grass for most of the year and they must be rewarded for that.

This State and this Government have not demanded sufficient funds from Europe for basic infrastructure. I am thinking, for instance, of sewerage schemes in rural towns and villages in County Kerry. All of that could be financed out of the EU's emergency pandemic response fund, but Ireland has not looked for that funding.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am very disappointed with the Minister, mar níl sé anseo. I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, but I used to listen to a radio programme many years ago that was known as "Dear Frankie". The Ceann Comhairle may

remember it. It seems Frankie has been put forward to answer everything in here. It just goes to show that the Government has no respect for this House. Members of the Government love to pay homage to the European bureaucrats, and the bureaucrats know it. That is why we are being penalised, perished and literally terrorised by these non-elected bureaucrats of Europe.

The Taoiseach said earlier in reply to Deputy Nolan's question about the situation with the selling of veterinary medicines by merchants, "Oh, it is a European directive." That is a reply he is good at giving. France gets these European directives and what does it do with them? It tears them up and puts them in the bin. We are the best boys in the class for obeying European directives. That is what we are good at, but we are feeble and inadequate in applying for funds, even those set up for recovery from the Covid pandemic. I nearly said "plandemic" instead of "pandemic" and I do not know whether there was not a bit of a plan. In fact, there is a plan in all of this, as I said a week or two weeks ago to the Taoiseach. Our country has given away so many of its freedoms during this pandemic. The last Fianna Fáil speaker invoked the anniversary of Seán Lemass. He was a great man and a visionary. He is turning in his grave at such a speed that evolution and science would be unable to measure it. I thought the Deputy might go back as far as Éamon de Valera but he did not. I am glad he acknowledged that the national herd will be cut because some of his colleagues are saying it will not be cut, which is a pipe dream.

We are the good boys of Europe, the best boys in the class. A totalitarianism has crept into Ireland, especially in the past 13 or 14 months but also before that. It is the European plan. There is now talk of a green passport. That was planned in 2018 and there were meetings about it in 2019, ever before we had Covid-19. It is shocking and diabolical. We are supposed to be an independent state. I do not know to where our independence has gone. We have feeble leaders and representatives who will not even come in here to listen or talk to us.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. We are lucky to have the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, in the Chamber.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I was not saying anything personal about the Minister of State.

An Ceann Comhairle: He is a man of many talents.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the statements to mark Europe Day. Sunday, 9 May was Europe Day. To mark the occasion, the Government paid for a four-page spread in the *Sunday Independent*. I assume similar content was bought in other Sunday newspapers. Perhaps the Minister could enlighten us at the end of this discussion as to how much that cost. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, wrote about peace and solidarity. Mairéad McGuinness, the European Commissioner for Financial Stability, Financial Services and the Capital Markets Union, wrote about solidarity and Next Generation EU. The pieces in the four-page broadsheet spread covered such topics as the European regional development fund, supporting small businesses, building emotional resilience, and peace for future generations.

There is no doubt there have been some benefits to membership of the European Union. However, I do not think institutions and bureaucrats spend any time on critical reflection. There was certainly none of it in this House today.

When we joined the European Economic Community, it set about stealing our fishing resources. It did that to Ireland, England and Denmark when they joined because these three countries brought significant fishing resources to the EU, as it existed at that time. That is

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important because development in this country has been completely unbalanced ever since, with Dublin becoming the economic driver. Members have spoken of how much we have got through Structural Funds, CAP payments and so on, as if that is something for which we should be thankful. Europe should be thanking us every day-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: -----for the €120 billion worth of fish we gave the EU and allowed its members to take out of our waters before the year 2000. In that same period, we received €45 billion in CAP payments, Structural Funds and every other kind of fund from Europe. Even at that time, in 2000, the deficit was €75 billion in our favour, and that figure has only grown in recent years. It is vital to remember that.

We have talked about how great Europe is and how it has delivered peace across the world. The asylum and migration policies of the EU have enabled and indirectly contributed to the deaths of untold numbers of people, including children and babies, in the seas around Europe. There is, for example, an ongoing humanitarian crisis in a camp in Lesbos where there are more than 7,000 people seeking asylum, over 2,000 of whom are children. The camp has just 350 toilets and 36 shower cabins. People are dying when they come to Europe because Europe has facilitated the devastation of African countries. We talk about peace. EU representatives are currently in Mali, bringing so-called peace to the country. They will be in Mozambique soon. We will be going there to facilitate the colonial ambitions of Portugal, France and countries like them to ensure they get their cut out of Africa.

It is vital that Europe stands up for the Palestinian people and clarifies what relationship Israel has with the European Union. That would help to move the issue along the road.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have to choose my words carefully as I only have two minutes and 57 seconds. Forgive me if I do not join in the hymn of praise. I am, nevertheless, obliged to say I am a proud Irishwoman and European woman. However, nowhere in the speech given by the Taoiseach did he refer to Palestine. I am going to quickly go back to something that was said earlier. One of the Social Democrats Deputies referred to the greatest threat to the European project as poverty. I second that. Poverty and inequality are threats, as is the twisting of language. The Minister and Minister of State should note that. Language means nothing any more when Israel tells us it had military targets. Nine children, among many other innocent people, are dead at a military target. Israel is one of the EU's biggest partners. Something is seriously wrong here. It is a serious threat to democracy when we twist language on its head.

I will not get through all of the notes I have made out but I will speak about the image of Europe that I see. Imagine having to declare this, but I am someone who, proudly, has family in Germany who speak fluent German. I am proud of them. We have all spent time in Germany. Let us leave that aside and look at the image we see of Europe as it progresses. We see fortress Europe and deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. I do think I will ever swim in the Mediterranean again, out of respect. The deaths of 621 migrants have been recorded in 2021, up to the end of April. Some 19,000 migrants have been reported dead or missing in the Mediterranean in the past six years. There has been a marked increase in the ratio of deaths to attempted crossings. The Minister of State is familiar with these figures but chooses not to use them. The Taoiseach chooses not to use them either. We are building up fortress Europe and an “us and them” mentality. That is the greatest threat to democracy.

The Minister of State will be more than familiar with the Frontex agency. I understand it is being investigated by the European Anti-Fraud Office, among other investigations. It is the agency the European Union has tasked with looking after our borders. It is working in collusion with the Libyan Government so that people are sent back to Libya. We have a terrible agreement with Turkey.

I have the greatest of respect for the Minister of State and I accept his bona fides on foreign affairs but surely in the midst of this hymn of praise to Europe, 71 years after the Schuman Declaration, we should have the confidence to ask if we have grown in wisdom. Has the European project grown in wisdom such that we realise when we distinguish between “them” and “us” that we are going to lose? The European project has failed to look at getting rid of intellectual property rights in the face of a pandemic. One year after the pandemic began, it has made no progress in that regard. In that way, we reinforce the “them” and “us” mentality that turns the Mediterranean into a coffin, a place in which people have died. If we are proud Europeans, surely that is what we should be looking at today. Surely we can be leaders in the world and show people that what is so important about Europe is that we are open and inclusive, and will actively work with others. When wrong is done, as is the case in Israel, we need to show that we, as a small country, have the courage to say we will not tolerate it in our name, nor will we allow Europe to do so.

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am sorry I was not here for all of this debate but I got a sense towards the end of the debate of some of the criticisms of, and frustrations with, Europe as it is today. I would be the first to recognise that Europe is far from perfect but the fact that we have regular, open debate and often strong disagreement on some of the issues that have been raised is a reflection of a European Union that is much bigger and more diverse than it ever has been and which contains different political perspectives. At the same time, the positives and strengths of the European Union far outweigh its weaknesses and inadequacies. It is up to us, as democrats, and up to me, as Minister for Foreign
6 o'clock Affairs, to ensure that an Irish perspective and value system have the greatest possible influence on the collective approach the European Union takes. That is why, for example, in the context of the Mediterranean, we sent, for the first time ever, a Naval Service vessel on a humanitarian mission of such a scale. In fact, we sent a series of vessels, one after the other.

I thank the House for making time available for statements to mark this year’s Europe Day and Europe week. I thank the Taoiseach and all the Deputies who have spoken for their contributions and work on a European stage.

On Israel and Palestine, I hope Deputy Connolly will be around later for parliamentary questions on foreign affairs when I will address that issue in some detail.

It is difficult to do so now at the end of a debate.

Over the past year, the EU endured a period of enormous change. It has faced an unprecedented global pandemic, which has impacted on the health of our peoples and shaken our societies and economies. It has also negotiated and navigated the formal departure of the UK from the Union. Europe Day is an important opportunity for us to reflect on the resilience of the Union in tackling a series of unprecedented crises over the past decade. Member states, of course, have their occasional disagreements but we all agree that the major challenges of our time require a global response, shaped by an ambitious European Union. Europe is at its best

when we act in unity and solidarity.

Ireland's vitality and evolving national identity remain inextricably linked to the success of the European Union. We need, therefore, to be more active than ever in shaping and influencing the Union and its priorities for the future.

Above all, Europe Day and Europe Week are about celebrating the EU's contribution to peace and unity over the past 71 years since the Schuman Declaration, which was referred to earlier, was signed in 1950. That is something I do not believe anyone in this House takes for granted. We must never cease to remind ourselves, especially our young people, that the Union remains at its core an inspiring example of peacebuilding and reconciliation based on the rule of law, not force of arms. We should cherish its values, avail of the opportunities it provides, be ambitious for its global role and deliver change, where required. There is a constant need for change and development.

Solidarity is a necessary cornerstone of European unity. Throughout the Brexit process, Ireland consistently received and was grateful for such solidarity. Representatives from our fellow member states visited the Border, listened to our concerns and stood firmly by us through the challenging negotiations between Brussels and London. The Union put its concerns and those of Ireland at the heart of all its negotiations.

Of course, the House is keenly aware of the challenges that have arisen in the implementation of the protocol. Yesterday, I met with Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič, who has become a true friend of Ireland and shows leadership and vision in trying to find constructive solutions to the ongoing negotiations with the UK. The Government fully supports his efforts to agree a roadmap which can achieve the implementation of the protocol. I welcome the ratification of the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement and look forward to an early establishment of its implementation structures, particularly at the partnership council, which should meet in the first week of next month.

On Europe Day last Sunday, the Conference on the Future of Europe was officially launched in Strasbourg. Ireland fully supports the conference and our national launch event will take place on Friday. As we begin to emerge into a new era of European recovery, it is timely to engage in some reflection on what kind of Europe we want. We want to see an inclusive conference with citizen engagement at the forefront. It is the Government's view that the focus of the work of the conference should be on practical policy issues rather than abstract debates on how the EU is governed or how it operates in the context of inter-institutional discussions.

Following the launch of the conference in Ireland, my colleague, the Minister of State with responsibility for EU Affairs, Deputy Thomas Byrne, will manage our national programme over the next year. Through this programme, the Government is strongly committed to hearing the voices of young people and also the views of EU citizens living in Northern Ireland. The conference programme will include a number of all-islands events as well.

This year's Europe Week has been accompanied by an important milestone in the work led by the Minister of State and me. I will now take the opportunity to inform the House about that milestone. Last week, we launched A Career for EU, Ireland's new strategy to increase our representation among the staff of the EU institutions and agencies. The promotion of EU careers in Ireland is a key whole-of-government priority. We recognise that more must be done to encourage and help Irish people to successfully apply for posts in the EU institutions when many

Irish senior officials are about to retire. This new strategy contains commitments to expand our existing EU careers, a promotional campaign across second and third level institutions, commitments to increase the supply of suitable candidates and to provide tailored support for Irish candidates for EU recruitment competitions, as well as measures to increase the European expertise of officials in the Civil Service.

Once again, I thank the House for its sustained engagement on European issues. Today's debate demonstrates our shared commitment to the Union and how it is central to the progress of our own country. Since its foundation, the Union has faced many challenges. Its demise has frequently been predicted. Rather than retreat and stagnate, the EU has been at its best when responding to the greatest challenges with ambition and unity. Today, we respond collectively to the systemic impact of the pandemic, provide global leadership on sustainable climate policies, ensure the highest standards in the regulation of the digital sector and insist that respect of human rights and the rule of law are cornerstones of civilised global engagement. We should certainly not be complacent, however. If the Union has risen to challenges and overcome them, it is only because of the sustained commitment and effort of its citizens, parliaments and governments working together. Ireland's voice in and contribution to the Union is more necessary and important than it has ever been. Our fellow Europeans want to hear ideas. They want our active contribution, ambition and solution-oriented approach. I am confident that we can fulfil and surpass these expectations.

As I said, I look forward to taking questions on some of the issues that were specifically raised with regard to Israel and Palestine on Question Time later this evening.

Residential Property Market: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the housing crisis continues to spiral out of control;
- residential property prices have increased by 3 per cent in the 12 months to February;
- residential property prices have increased by 88.5 per cent since early 2013;
- high rents and residential property prices are making it increasingly difficult for workers, families and struggling home buyers to purchase and own their own home;
- institutional investors holding rental property avail of significant tax advantages and exemptions granted to them by the Government;
- these institutional investors include Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), introduced by the Fine Gael-led Government in the Finance Act 2013, and Irish Real Estate Funds (IREFs);

- REITs and IREFs pay no corporation tax on income from their property rental businesses;

- REITs and IREFs pay no capital gains tax accruing on the disposal of assets of their property rental businesses;

- institutional investors, including REITs and IREFs:

- enjoy tax advantages and exemptions that are distorting the housing market; and

- are displacing workers, families and struggling home buyers in the residential property market;

- institutional investors:

- have developed monopolistic and oligopolistic pricing power in local areas throughout the State, distorting rental and property markets to the detriment of workers, families and struggling home buyers; and

- are pricing average and low-income earners out of purchasing or renting from the private market;

- the displacement of workers, families and struggling first-time buyers, through the purchase of existing property in the residential market by institutional investors, has been taking place for several years;

- Government policies have facilitated, incentivised and encouraged the displacement of struggling home buyers by institutional investors in the residential property market;

- recent purchases of residential property by institutional investors in Mullen Park, Maynooth and Bay Meadows, Dublin, that have displaced workers, families and struggling home buyers, are a direct consequence of these policies; and

- investment by these institutional investors in the residential property market reached €1.2 billion in 2020, and is expected to grow in this and subsequent years without immediate policy intervention; and

calls on the Government to:

- introduce legislation to end the tax advantages and exemptions granted by the Government to institutional investors, including REITs and IREFs, in the residential property market;

- introduce legislation to impose a stamp duty surcharge on the purchase of residential property by institutional investors including REITs and Irish Real Estate Funds;

- direct the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to bring forward, as a matter of urgency, measures to restrict the activity of institutional investors in the residential property market and their displacement of workers, families and struggling home buyers from the market; and

— further direct the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to consider, as a matter of urgency, amendments to the Planning and Development Act 2000, introducing tenure type and mix as a matter of consideration in all future planning applications and approvals.

Táim ag roinnt mo chuid ama. Molaim an rún seo ar son Theachtaí Dála Shinn Féin. Le rófhada anois, an polasaí a bhí ag an Rialtas seo agus an Rialtas roimhe ná cead agus spreagadh a thabhairt do chistí idirnáisiúnta theacht isteach anseo agus gnáthdhaoine a ghlasáil amach as an margadh. Feidhm an rún atá os ár gcomhair ná deireadh a chur leis an scannal seo anois agus go deo.

In May 2020, one of the State’s leading wealth advisory firms circulated a paper to potential investors in the housing market in which it gave an honest and accurate account of Government policy and its impact on renters and homeownership. The paper stated:

The current high level of house prices and rents in Ireland’s residential property market have been driven in a significant way by the Government’s housing policy with favourable policies attracting institutional investors in the market

It went on to state:

The aim of institutions is to maximise their rental income from their properties and developers are also designing apartment blocks to maximise this income for institutions rather than aiming to meet the needs of society

The investment advisory firm concluded accurately when it stated, “The current housing policy has benefited both institutions and developers at the expense of individual buyers.” That is the truth of this Government policy. Those are not words according to me or Sinn Féin but to the industry speaking to itself in 2020.

Last week, Round Hill Capital snapped up 135 homes in a new residential estate at Mullen Park in Maynooth, snatching homeownership from struggling homebuyers who had worked hard to save for deposits. The previous week, the same fund snapped up an entire estate of 112 homes in a new development in Dublin called Bay Meadows. For the public and whole generations locked out of homeownership by this Government and those which preceded it, this was simply the last straw. The Government is now scrambling to fix a problem it created in the first place. I have heard Ministers try to claim that this is something new and that it is an unintended consequence of Government policy. Let me say very clearly that this is nothing new. It has been going on for years. In 2019 alone, developers sold off 2,909 newly-built homes as private rental sales in Dublin. This meant that 57%, six out of every ten, of newly built homes in Dublin were taken off the market and sold, in the majority of cases, to these investment funds. This was in 2019, not 2021. In the same year, more than 3,000 second-hand homes were bought by these funds. This is not by accident, it is by design. The Government has facilitated and encouraged this policy.

Many of these investment firms are REITs, which were introduced by means of legislation brought forward by the Fine Gael-Labour Government in 2013. REITs pay no corporation tax on rental profit. They pay no capital gains tax when they sell their properties and pay little in the way of stamp duty. Many of their shareholders pay less tax on the dividends they receive than the average Irish worker does on his or her wages. Some of them actually pay no tax at all. These investments were afforded tax advantages by the Government. Sinn Féin’s motion calls

for these tax advantages and exemptions to come to an end.

Far from this being a new request from Sinn Féin, we have been calling for it to happen for years. Only six months ago, I tabled amendments to the Finance Bill calling for the full rate of capital gains tax and a stamp duty surcharge to be applied to these funds only for them to be voted against by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Greens. Now that the Government has been caught out, it is scrambling to give some appearance of action and an indication that it really wanted to do something.

This motion calls on the Government to take immediate action to introduce legislation to end these tax advantages and exemptions which it and previous Governments have given these investment funds, including REITs and IREFs. It calls for the introduction of the imposition of a stamp duty surcharge on the purchase of homes by investment funds, including REITs and IREFs, as proposed by Sinn Féin in our budget submission last year. It urgently calls for the introduction of measures to restrict the activity of these funds and to end their price gouging, as well as the pushing out of struggling homeowners and buyers from the market.

Investment funds are locking workers and families out of home ownership. This is nothing new. It is not an accident because it has been happening for years. It is the direct result of the Government's policy. Sinn Féin has been calling it out for years. It is now time to bring it to an end. This motion should be supported and investment funds should be stopped from making housing unaffordable.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend Deputies Pearse Doherty, Ó Broin and others in Sinn Féin on bringing this issue to the forefront of the political debate in recent months and years. What people saw in the past couple of weeks with REITs buying whole housing estates is a reflection of what is happening up and down the country. Many people have contacted me who have family members trying to buy homes. A man in County Leitrim contacted me the other day. He has two sons who he paid for to go through college. When one of his children was sick when they were young, he could not get a medical card and had to pay for the treatment. He subsequently had to buy health insurance. Throughout all of his life he has paid. Now his two sons, educated with good jobs, have no hope of affording houses. They would need salaries of between €100,000 and €120,000 per annum to buy a house in Dublin.

At the same time, the Government's policies are driving this whole agenda of what it calls the professionalising of the rental sector. What that means is making the rental sector something which will make maximum profit for large investment companies. That is totally at odds with what the ordinary people of this country want. It is time the Minister and the Government copped on to that. People are seeing what the Minister is doing. He is not working for the ordinary people of this country. Rather, he is working for the big investors and those with the inside track. That needs to end now.

The reality for many people is that they just simply cannot afford to live in this country. That is being brought home to so many. We have a situation whereby people work and save to buy homes for themselves and future generations of their families but the Government closes that off for them. This is down to the Government's policies, which come from the playbooks of Thatcher and Reagan. This is not an accident or a consequence the Government did not foresee. The Government's policy is driven towards making the whole housing sector a commodity which can be bought and sold in order that people will be slaves to it for the rest of their lives. That needs to end.

The Minister needs to support this motion and ensure that he acts on this. Yesterday evening, I watched the “Claire Byrne Live” show with the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, fumbling his way through and coming up with answers nobody believed. It is time the Government copped on. People are seeing through the Minister in the context of what he is at. It is time he stated clearly that he will drive these vultures out of the country. Michael Noonan invited them in. It is time for the Minister to send them home.

Deputy Chris Andrews: Increasingly, the Government and that which preceded it have turned the State into a paradise for vulture funds. Contrary to what most ordinary people think, housing units are now viewed by the State as assets for the purpose of generating capital for investors ahead of building homes for workers. This may have come as a shock to many after what we saw happen in Maynooth. However, this has been a visible reality within communities across Dublin Bay South and inner city Dublin for years now. First-time buyers in communities like Ringsend, Kevin Street, Harold’s Cross, Rathmines and even Ranelagh are all too familiar with seeing the same faces at each viewing, buying up home after home for a third party on behalf of these investment funds. Dublin Bay South has traditionally not been a strong support base for Sinn Féin. However, one of the key elements as to why Sinn Féin did so well there in the general election was down to the then Government’s failure on housing. We had canvassers from Ranelagh and Rathmines. We got votes in those areas because people were fed up with the Government’s housing policy. Anyone who thinks that a Fine Gael success in the forthcoming by-election in the constituency is going to be a slam dunk is going to be in for a surprise. The issue of housing has not gone away.

Those who were shocked at what happened in Maynooth were silent when the same thing was effectively happening in the inner city, with working-class families being pushed out right across the Docklands. In communities in that area, families had to watch their sons and daughters being pushed far outside those communities and having to live far away from them and their friends on foot of the actions of vulture funds and the big tech companies that rip communities apart. Once again, we see profit margins being allowed to reign supreme over local communities. As is often the case, these crises only seem to trigger outrage in the media when the issue transcends traditional class lines. Housing needs to be seen as a building block for communities not an asset from which to make financial profits.

Deputy David Cullinane: There is no consensus on housing. We are certainly not as one on this issue. How could we be when one considers the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael way? Ever since I became involved in politics, I have seen Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael bail this State out of its responsibilities in terms of building social and unaffordable housing. This Government and that which preceded it have left ordinary working people who work hard and want to own their own homes to the mercy of the market. The Minister has made sure that the private housing market is what comes first.

The victims in this are the people who get up early in the morning and work until late in the evening. They have no chance to buy homes of their own because of the Government’s failures. Its affordable housing plan lies in tatters because it did not offer the necessary solutions. The Minister can shake his head but the people out there in the real world who are victims of the Government’s housing policy and failures know it to be the case. We do not have to convince them. They are telling us every day of the week.

People who do not have access to social or affordable homes are seeing house prices and rents go up every week. Those struggling families who we represent and give a voice to are

paying huge amounts of their income on rent. They cannot afford to save. For these hardworking people, home ownership is now beyond them because of the Government's failure. In the Ireland built by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, we have a situation where landlords come before tenants. We see this with rising rents year on year, month on month, and week on week. We saw in the past and we are seeing it again where banks are being put first above people who own their own home and are in mortgage distress. Now we see vulture funds and institutional investors swooping in to buy properties that should be available for people who want to own their own homes. As a consequence, house prices are being pushed up. The Minister has no idea what it is like for the people struggling out there, who want to own their own home and need affordable homes. If he did, he would act. If he really wanted to take on these investor funds, he would.

As I have said time and again, people will only get some relief and see substantial change in the delivery of social and affordable homes when we do not have a Government made up of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, parties which put speculators, banks and vulture funds first, and when Deputy Doherty is Minister for Finance and Deputy Ó Broin is Minister with responsibility for housing. That is when we will see the substantial changes people need and the homes that need to be built for hard-working families.

Deputy John Brady: The situation the Government has allowed to develop around housing is so horrific it is difficult to believe it is being allowed to happen here and now. When it comes to Fianna Fáil and property developers, the phrase "Catch me once" begins to form in the mind. I believe members of the public will agree with me when I say Sinn Féin is delivering a clear message today to Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party that the people will not allow themselves to be caught a second time. The shame in this belongs squarely at the Government's door. Let the message be clear and unambiguous - this Government must put an immediate end to the sweetheart tax deals that have facilitated wealthy investment funds in gobbling up housing at the expense of ordinary people attempting to get on the property ladder.

From the off, we have witnessed both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael defending the tax advantages they have made available to these vulture funds, which squeeze out of the market first-time buyers such as those in Mullen Park in Maynooth. In my constituency of Wicklow, Glenveagh Properties is on course to secure over €60 million for the sale of 100 apartments at its Marina Village scheme in Greystones to the German investor, Realis. In the rental sector in Wicklow, renters are being forced to pay an average rent of €1,324.68 per month. Alongside the average rent in County Kildare, these are the highest rents in the country outside Dublin. The Minister refuses to put rent caps in place to tackle that. Why is that and who does it suit? The answer is simple; it suits the Minister's investor mates.

First-time buyers are being trapped in a purgatory of excessive rent from which they find it hard to believe they will ever escape. If and when they can afford to purchase a home, it often results in them having to leave their community in search of something affordable because in the Minister's world, €400,000 is affordable in County Wicklow. That is certainly not a world ordinary working families live in. When these people are forced out of their communities they leave behind their family supports and the social fabrics of their communities. This Government is responsible for one of the worst social disasters in the history of the State, the impact of which will most probably be felt for many decades to come. Shame on the Minister, his party and this entire Government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and their colleagues in the Green Party.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There has been a housing crisis in this State for decades. It

has many facets and it has been presided over by this Government and previous Governments. That is a fact that cannot be denied by the Government or its predecessors. They have presided over the chaos that is housing policy in this State. They have facilitated developers continuously, year in and year out, decade after decade. Even when developers went bang, Governments have stepped in and bailed them out.

There have been many facets to this crisis, as I said, but the latest one was predicted and the Government was warned about it, yet it took no action. In fact, the Government facilitated and encouraged international REITs and Irish real estate funds, IREFs, to come in and invest in housing in Ireland. The Government encouraged them to compete with ordinary workers in this State who are trying their best to get money together for a deposit and obtain the permissions they need to draw down a mortgage for what might be a starter home or, in some cases, a dream home or “forever home”, as they are known. What happens when these people have everything in place? The funds the Government has encouraged overbid them because they offer sometimes €50,000, €60,000 or even €80,000 more per home than the poor Irish taxpayers trying to buy these homes can afford. That is the Government’s policy; it is what the Minister has stood over. These people have been let down by the Government, yet we have heard the Minister’s spokespeople say over the years that there is not a problem.

In my area, ordinary workers are now being asked for huge sums. The price on the market for a council house in Ballyfermot, for instance, is €300,000. Down the road in Crumlin, prices of €400,000 are being sought. This is for an ordinary corporation house. There is nothing wrong with the area. What is wrong is the price and the people who have presided over that are this Government and its predecessors. They have encouraged multinationals to invest through the REITs and IREFs to ensure normal working people cannot afford homes.

The Minister should think back to when he may only have had a few bob and was trying to get a home for himself. Even if he was trying to rent one of the houses I mentioned, it would cost him €2,400 per month to rent a council house in Ballyfermot or Crumlin. That is crazy. No ordinary worker can afford that. The Minister is saddling people with huge debts. Not only that, he is now encouraging these firms to come in and invest in Irish property so they can make huge profits without paying tax and without benefiting the State or society. It is time for this to end.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“notes that the highest ever budget for housing in the history of the State was made available in 2021, with €3.3 billion in funding;

accepts that there is an overall need to protect pathways to home ownership;

further notes that the Government is bringing forward significant amounts of new social housing supply, with an intention to provide 50,000 new social housing dwellings over the next five years, with substantial levels of Exchequer funding required to meet that commitment;

welcomes the significant progress in tackling homelessness with a 38.6 per cent drop in family homelessness and an 18.6 per cent drop in overall homeless numbers;

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notes the positive impact of the 2020 Voids Stimulus Programme in bringing 3,600 units back into use and further plans for 3,000 units this year to help address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social housing construction;

acknowledges that the Government is committed to improving the supply of housing and affordability for first-time buyers and has brought forward significant measures already in the Affordable Housing Bill 2020 and the Land Development Agency Bill 2021;

recognises that the Housing Need Demand Assessment completed by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and informed by the Economic and Social Research Institute research, demonstrates a need to ramp up housing supply to at least 33,000 new units per year over the next ten years, across social, affordable/Cost Rental, private rental and private ownership areas funded by subvention by the State and private sector;

estimates the total cost of meeting housing requirements of some 350,000 units over the next decade at over €120 billion over the next ten years;

notes that the Government is:

- bringing forward three new schemes under the Affordable Housing Bill 2020, to meet the requirements of those who require more affordable housing, including a new Cost Rental tenure type;

- bringing forward measures to increase the contribution under Part V of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 from 10 per cent to 20 per cent for social housing, to include affordable and Cost Rental housing, which will be tabled at Committee Stage of the Affordable Housing Bill 2020;

- enabling the use of public land for the provision of housing through the Land Development Agency, with funding available of €1.25 billion and a similar level of borrowing allowed; and

- enabling small and medium housing developers through the Home Building Finance Ireland agency, with funding of €730 million available, of which €395 million has already been committed;

believes that viability in urban cores is a concern and is an area where there is scope for investment funds to play an important role in terms of forward purchasing of developments for sale or for rent;

and furthermore, notes that:

- to date, investment funds are a very small part of the overall housing market, holding less than 1 per cent of overall housing stock and 5 per cent of all tenancies;

- any combination of planning and taxation measures to support home ownership in lower density type developments must be balanced and proportionate, while cognisant of ongoing viability issues in the housing sector; and

- the Government is committed to bringing forward, as a matter of urgency, appropriate solutions through a mix of planning and taxation or related measures

to ensure that the pathway to home ownership is protected in low density suburban developments and enabled in high density apartment developments.”

I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Government. At the heart of my approach to housing is a simple argument that owning a home is good for individuals, families, communities and our country. It rests on a fundamental belief that persons earning a decent wage should be able to buy their own home. What happened in Maynooth last week was unacceptable. It flies in the face of that core Government policy and belief. It offends our shared sense of fairness that if one works hard, one should have something to show for it.

Our democracy is founded on the idea that our children can do better than us, just as our parents hoped for. We need a housing system that reflects this. I assure renters, those saving now for deposits and adults living at home with their parents - whom I have spoken about on many occasions since taking over as Minister - that the Government is taking action to stop this from happening. In opposition I brought forward legislation in this regard and flagged the matter as recently as April. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and I are reviewing options right now to make a real, positive impact in this space and together we will bring forward measures on behalf of Government to address this issue.

Over the past ten months, the Government has brought forward the largest housing budget on record and the most ambitious targets in the history of the State. These included €3.3 billion for housing alone and 9,500 new build social homes as part of a programme to build 50,000 new social homes over the term of this Government. The Government is the largest builder and player in this State in relation to the provision of homes. By the summer, we will have passed two major Bills, the affordable housing Bill and Land Development Agency Bill, both of which will put home ownership at the centre of the solution to our housing crisis. These are specific measures to help generation rent become a generation of people who can afford their own home at an affordable rate. These are real measures and policies, not empty rhetoric. In July, the new Housing for All plan will lay out a comprehensive new vision for affordable homes as part of our overall housing strategy. We are levelling the playing field for first-time buyers to give working people a real chance to realise their dream of home ownership.

In contrast, the Sinn Féin Party, which has brought forward this motion, is pretending to be a friend of first-time buyers when everything it does points to the contrary. Its cigarette box affordable housing scheme excludes a nurse and garda on average income and comes with a major catch, which is that people do not own their homes at the end. Today Sinn Féin even attempted further delay by filibustering the affordable housing Bill at committee, which is landmark legislation that will be a leap forward in tackling the housing crisis. It is the most comprehensive legislation for affordable housing and from day one, Sinn Féin has tried to delay its progress and stop it in its tracks.

I will not abandon first-time buyers or use them as a political pawn like the Sinn Féin Party does.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Get out of here.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This Government will help them out and I hope Sinn Féin will see fit to support the affordable housing Bill when it stops delaying its passage in committee.

Sinn Féin's political tactics are slash and burn, not build and renew. First-time buyers are collateral damage in that political game, which is what part of today's motion is. Its record on

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helping first-time buyers is all too clear. The party publicly opposed the help-to-buy scheme, which ensured 22,000 homeowners got keys to their doors. Deputy Doherty and his colleagues oppose that scheme and would scrap it. They opposed the Land Development Agency Bill, which brings about a land management agency to put the State's land to productive use to deliver affordable and social homes for working people. Sinn Féin opposes it.

It also opposed the shared equity scheme and housing development motions on 16 of 21 occasions at Dublin City Council. It has opposed 975 homes being built in Clondalkin, including 30% social housing. It opposed 500 homes in Tallaght, of which 80% would have been social or affordable purchase. It opposed 278 homes in Swords and continues to oppose 1,200 homes in Donabate, 238 of which are affordable and another 238 of which are social homes. That is what Sinn Féin is doing on the ground. They are more real examples of the Sinn Féin mantra of "I am all for housing but".

We now know what Sinn Féin is against but we never know of what it is in favour. The country needs approximately 350,000 new homes by 2030, with funding of over €120 billion. How much of this does Sinn Féin believe should come from the private sector? There is a giant hole in the Sinn Féin doughnut-shaped housing policy, and it is the private sector. Small and medium-sized builders will play a massive role in driving supply and this is key to addressing the crisis. In the Sinn Féin vision, they have no role but we need people to build homes. One would think, listening to Sinn Féin, such builders are not required and the party could not even bring itself to call for the construction sector to be reopened after the pandemic. This Government and I will use every tool in our armoury to get bricks and mortar put on the ground for homes that working people can afford. To have a real impact on this, we must have pragmatic measures with both the public and private sector. We cannot fight with one hand tied behind our back.

We should not allow one party's perfect be the enemy of the common good. Half-baked Opposition claims that the public sector could next year deliver 20,000 units are really the stuff of Legoland building. Sinn Féin claims it could deliver 20,000 public homes this year but Deputy Ó Broin will not say where they would be, how they would be built, who would build them or how long it would take. This completely ignores the reality of the pandemic. We can see the party's trenchant criticism of specific housing projects, which have real plans to deliver homes for working people, without even thinking about the party's misleading ownership schemes. Political grandstanding will not build new homes but practical policies will. That is what the Government is committing to do through our affordable housing Bill, our Land Development Agency Bill and the single biggest budget in the history of the State related to housing.

Inevitably, the pandemic and the current shutdown of the sector will have a severe impact on output this year. We will need to be imaginative in the coming months to drive on supply by tackling vacancies and improving delivery. Silver bullet solutions like this motion will not cut it but we can also put in place legislative foundations for a new approach to this crisis, where home ownership can be put right back on the table for a generation. It is the very subject I have spoken about since the day I took over as Minister. That has been smothered up to now by rising rents and job uncertainty. We will use targeted planning and taxation measures to protect buyers from predatory actions such as those we saw in Maynooth, and will ensure that private institutional investment is focused where it needed, that is, to boost supply rather than take from it.

I fully recognise that the Government must tackle this matter and we are committed to doing

so in a real and effective way by putting home ownership in a central position and passing our affordable housing and Land Development Agency Bills and by launching and rolling out the very first cost rental affordable scheme in the history of the State. These are real measures that will take effect in this country.

I have met the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, and it is a priority for our Government to address the issue of bulk-selling of properties from under the noses of first-time buyers. We will take measures promptly to ensure a fix can be put in place. I hope that when measures are brought forward, the Deputies opposite who introduced this evening's motion will see their way to supporting them.

I also hope that when the Sinn Féin Party, in particular, and others look at the measures being brought forward by the Government with the affordable housing Bill and the Land Development Agency Bill, it will be honest with the people they purport to represent. Within those Bills are real measures, money and resources to support first-time buyers and ensure people can realise the dream of home ownership. This is a whole generation that has, for too long, been locked out of that market. It is a priority for the Government that people can own their own home at an affordable rate and have somewhere secure to call their own, whether it is to rent or buy. It is what we are focused on doing. We will detail further measures on how to protect first-time buyers in future shortly.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The Sinn Féin motion stands up for young people. It puts those young people and their right to buy a home ahead of developers and institutional investment funds. The Government's policies continue to fail young people caught up in this housing crisis caused by this Government and its Fine Gael-led predecessors.

The Minister said he had the solutions when he was in opposition but now he in government and is continuing to act in the same way as Fine Gael. He is dancing to the tune of the developers and investment funds. The Minister knows this is wrong because he wrote a Bill to tackle this problem in the previous Dáil. Tweaks and smaller changes will not work; he must ban these practices outright.

The Minister must give young people a chance and give them hope. People are angry and they have every right to be. The now famous parliamentary party meetings last week indicated Fianna Fáil is blaming Fine Gael and Fine Gael is blaming Fianna Fáil for this mess but the people know who is to blame. This was caused equally by both parties. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been and always will be on the side of big developers. The Government could change this today. They could surprise me and support this motion.

I will leave it at this:

To whom do we owe our allegiance today?

[...] the faceless men who for mark and dollar,

Betray her to the highest bidder.

I know where my allegiances sit. They sit with the young people all over this country who are desperate to own a home of their own.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I commend my colleagues, Deputies Ó Broin and Doherty, on

all of their continuous work on this issue. I would like to talk about the impact of investment firms buying up large swathes of housing in Ireland from the perspective of young people, and in particular those in their 20s. It is a group that sometimes gets forgotten about, not just in housing but in an awful lot of things in this country.

The ESRI's Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland report, parts of which were published today, points to a significant share of young people facing excessive housing costs in comparison to their incomes. That will not come as a surprise to any of us. It examines the unique set of circumstances facing young people who are, in the main, engaged in insecure employment and who have been forced by successive failure in housing policy by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments into a rental market with significant and acute affordability issues. I know housing affordability and availability is an issue that affects all age groups but for young people, the prospect of home ownership has collapsed in recent decades. The findings paint a stark picture of housing affordability for young people in Ireland in 2021.

The consequences of declining rates of home ownership for young people over several generations mean that these same young people are forced into the private rental market, where affordability has been aggravated by eye-wateringly high rents. Outside of the capital and in rural areas like my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, the private rental market has become increasingly unaffordable for many young people. That is if one can find a property to rent. It is nearly impossible to find a property to rent and it is impossible to afford it as they are in the region of €1,200 to €1,500 per month for Kilkenny and Carlow. One can forget about it if one is trying to find a place that will take the housing assistance payment, HAP, as one has no chance.

The Minister might not like it and he can have a go at us all he wants but everybody on the street knows the reality and the consequences of allowing investment firms to buy up huge swathes of homes in newly-built housing estates throughout the country. This is what has resulted and this is what we will continue to see unless it is stopped.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have a housing policy that has failed. We have heard many times over the years of the consistent and constant failure to build council houses, affordable cost rental homes and houses that can be bought at affordable rates. We have heard all the stories in recent days: of people who are paying extortionate rates of rent; of those who are lucky enough to avail of HAP and who still have to pay top-ups; and of the huge amount of money we spend on HAP as a State. In 2020 we spent in or around €464.6 million on HAP. This is crazy. We are on the side of IREFs and REITs and we have facilitated them with tax breaks every which way.

It is all well and good to say that public expenditure can only cover X, Y or Z but there are many means of drawing down money, whether that is through Europe or private money, but it needs to deliver for people. We need to put a shape and structure in place that allow people to afford rents and to be able to buy affordable houses and in order that we produce affordable cost rentals. The system we have is utterly dysfunctional and is not working for anybody. There is talk about the Land Development Agency, LDA, being a solution and selling land to developers, as opposed to using our own land. Even if that is the case, we will be getting developers to build on it to produce what we need to produce. If we talk about an affordable housing scheme with houses at €450,000, where are we going? Everybody is being priced out of the market. We have a huge quotient of people who will miss their slot to be able to buy houses.

We hear from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that they are the parties of delivering for homeown-

ership. They need to do it. I am not overly concerned about anything from an ideological point of view but let us be clear that what Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have done to date has not worked and what they are planning to do will not work. Rather than make snide comments, it would be far better for them to read the real solutions that Deputies Ó Broin and Doherty have put together. We should stop the political backbiting and we could deliver for our people because we are failing them.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It was already hard enough for young people, people trying to start out and people trying to have a home of their own. It was already hard enough trying to pull together a deposit with extortionate rents and with housing not being available anywhere near them or their communities. It was already such a challenge for many workers. The Minister is making the argument that this is an issue that has appeared overnight and has just come to light. The Minister knew this was happening in many communities around the State and he wrote the rules to encourage the institutional investors. Workers who are paying rents that are through the roof are competing with these international funds that can buy up whole estates and gazump them completely. It is soul-destroying for people of my age who feel they have no hope of ever having a permanent home. For them, income limits for social housing have not been changed in years and many of them do not qualify for that. The possibility of ever having their own home or a mortgage is completely out of their reach.

Some of the talk has suggested that the Government is delivering and that this is a key priority. Let there be no mistake; we have supported many measures that have been productive and useful but where they are failing, we will criticise them and make noises. The Bill the Minister has produced will not deliver and his policies will not deliver. I hear talk of affordable housing with prices up to €400,000 in Cork city. That is like Marie Antoinette and let them eat cake to people. It is Monopoly money to people. It is not anywhere near the mark to charge €400,000 for an affordable house in Cork city. It is beyond any imaginable reach for ordinary workers and families. This is one thing the Minister needs to do. There is an awful lot more and it is focused on cost rental and public housing but he needs to ensure that the advantage and incentives he has given these funds are removed.

Deputy Ged Nash: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion on behalf of the Labour Party. I heard the Taoiseach say this week that the issue of housing is the biggest issue facing young people and I agree with him. It is also the biggest issue facing our society more generally. Precarious housing and precarious work produce precarious lives. Precarious lives destroy communities and wreck social cohesion and they will destroy our social contract.

The Minister made reference in his contribution to the fact that it used to be the case that if one studied hard, worked hard and saved hard, one had a shot at owning one's own home. This is no longer the case for far too many people. I have said time and again before this awful pandemic hit that this generation that was born in the 1980s and the 1990s was likely to be the first since Independence that was destined to do less well than their parents. The ESRI report published this morning confirms that to be the case. It makes for harrowing reading. On all the metrics such as housing, pay and decent work and life opportunities, younger people have been the casualties.

Fine Gael has told us in recent years that things are going ever so well. On GDP terms we are but if one looks under the bonnet it tells an entirely different story. The economic and financial disaster that was inherited from Fianna Fáil in 2011 was fixed, in no small part, by the work done by my party, and by Fine Gael I must acknowledge. It turns out though that the sacrifices

made then brought about a recovery for some but left a whole generation behind, the generation at least facing the risk of being left behind. Household wealth has grown enormously since 2013. This is down to year-on-year growth in house prices and supply is a factor here. Fine Gael knows where its electoral and political market is. We are two Fine Gael housing Ministers later, all tacitly backed by Fianna Fáil. During those years, we failed to build the public, private and affordable homes people need. We failed to make renting secure. We failed to see sufficient caps placed on ever-escalating record rents.

Fine Gael is in an ideological cul-de-sac and it now has a Fianna Fáil Minister cornered and captured. This is truly no country for young people. Is it any wonder that REITs and IREFs have declared open season on Ireland? These faceless monster investment funds have it every way. They are hoovering up everything in sight and are now outbidding would-be first-time buyers in areas such as my home town of Drogheda. The longer the supply problem exists, the better will be the yield for these funds' investors. These funds exploit tax rules introduced in a certain context in 2012. Those rules have remained largely untouched since, with a small exception or two. Almost ten years on, and in a fundamentally different housing market and environment, it is high time that time was called on certain activities of these funds. It is morally unjust and politically indefensible that REITs and IREFs pay the same percentage rate of stamp duty on residential purchases as typical first-time buyers. Even Boris Johnson's Conservative Party cottoned on to the impact of REITs and slapped a 15% rate of stamp duty on them, with additional surcharges in some cases. If the political will exists in the Government, this and other very targeted tax measures could be taken to soften the cough of these vehicles that are, frankly, drunk and out of control on tax breaks.

It is also open to the Government to change the tax rules that apply to these structures. REITs elect to be considered REITs by Revenue. There are clear rules that need to be complied with for a REIT to benefit from exemptions such as those relating to corporate tax and capital gains tax. These rules can be amended and aligned with Government planning on housing policy in a targeted way to restrict or, indeed, end the activity that we all say we are so concerned about.

My colleague, Senator Rebecca Moynihan, has proposed a number of key measures that would be game changers for renters, for the provision of public, private and long-term rental homes and for first-time buyers. She has also made some very important points about the way in which housing is discussed, the narrative around it and how it is almost always presented through the lens of a couple, and more specifically, a couple who are first-time buyers. Housing is an issue for everyone. Let us not forget the 400,000 people who live alone and those who want to remain as single-person households. They also need security, certainty and a chance to own their own place.

Senator Moynihan was not playing games when she pledged last week to introduce a Bill from the artist formerly known as plain old Deputy Darragh O'Brien before he entered the Customs House. That Bill has been submitted this week in the name of Deputy Duncan Smith. We submitted it because we believe it has potential, if amended, to be a fix for the problems we are experiencing. The submission of the Bill is also designed to keep the Minister honest.

Our view, expressed long before we reached this sorry pass, is that we need a complete and fundamental culture shift on the provision of housing and how we view housing policy more generally. Housing ought not to be a commodity to be traded. It is not a status symbol. The only ladder we should associate with housing is that one we use to clean our windows. The financialisation of housing has destroyed lives and communities. Let us get back to building

good well-designed homes and integrated communities and not just units, in the language of the business, informed by cost and profit motive.

I also have a word of warning for the Minister. The kind of investment we will need for an ambitious public home building programme will require unprecedented levels of State capital investment. At present, we can borrow money at negative interest rates but EU spending strictures, which owe more to an economic experiment from the financial crash than to the circumstances of 2021 and beyond, could see us straitjacketed.. At the same time as we are prevented from borrowing, the European Central Bank and other central banks are flooding the markets with cheap cash. There are vast amounts of money circulating the world in search of investment. This includes investment in developing land and housing. The net result of this is a bidding war for capital assets, which inevitably is causing capital asset inflation.

The real effect of these investment funds outbidding each other is the impact this is having on potential first-time buyers in Ireland. This is the real world impact. This is the effect. The double whammy is that, on the one hand, Europe, through its lending, fiscal and monetary policy, is funding the investors who are driving up the price of Irish houses while, on the other hand, through its borrowing policy, it is preventing the Government from borrowing in order to build sufficient numbers of public and affordable homes. It is as if Europe were selling discount weapons to its enemies while imposing strict disarmament upon itself. No one could argue that the combined effect of these two policies was ever intended or that it is sustainable. Frankly, it needs to change.

My firm view is that if the future of the EU is to be a strong entity to which we can all give our support, and I do, then after the pandemic we will need a Marshall plan investment approach to rebuilding our economies and to building the homes, social infrastructure and secure jobs on which social solidarity and national and EU cohesion depend. This requires the type of investment that, frankly, anachronistic EU fiscal rules, which are completely outdated as they are structured, do not allow. This needs to change to help us reach our ambitions for Ireland in terms of capital investment in housing and infrastructure to make sure we can rebuild our economy and rebuild our society and build back better.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I thank Deputies Ó Broin and Doherty for tabling the motion. I was looking forward to hearing what the Minister’s proposals and solutions would be. I was disappointed that instead he used most of his time to engage the usual attack on Opposition parties. That is probably designed to deflect and avoid responsibility. I would like to hear more proposals. Last week, we were promised by the Minister that there would be action this week. I hope he will carry through on that promise.

The Bill the Minister tabled in 2019 when he was in opposition, and which was referenced by Deputy Nash, is far too weak. Its ambition is to allow only 0% to 30% of new development land to be reserved for first-time buyers. If we were starting at 30%, we might be going somewhere. There is also the fact that the Bill looks at land and not the number of homes. It looks at a percentage of the land. It would be quite normal in a development to have the higher density homes occupying most of the land and the lower density homes being sold to individual buyers. This aspect of it needs to be changed. Part of this needs to come from the planning side but this will take years to kick in. It will take far too long. We also know there are weaknesses in the planning system with regard to enforcement. This can only be part of the solution.

The Minister correctly stated that there needs to be a very strong role for small and medium

builders in addressing housing supply and yet there are reports today that the home building finance agency is funding large developers to build homes to sell off to investment funds and cuckoo funds and in the process is squeezing out small and medium builders.

In 2010, 76 individual homes were bought by institutional investors. In the first quarter of this year, a record €696 million was spent by cuckoo funds, which means €53 million a week was spent on buying up homes. At the same time, we are seeing that each successive generation is less likely to own their own homes than the previous generation. In the past decade, Irish house prices rose by just under 30%. At the same time, rents increased by more than 60%. In Dublin, rents have risen by 85% since early 2011. This increasingly means that investors will get a better return on renting out homes than on providing them for sale on the open market to individual buyers. This is part of the problem.

A paper published by Dr. Michael Byrne of UCD's school of social policy, social work and social justice on institutional investment and the private rental sector states demand on the part of international capital for real estate assets in Ireland appears to be virtually insatiable. How does he reach this conclusion? He looks at the yields that investors can get in Ireland from the rental sector. He notes there is consensus that the yields are at 3.75%. These yields are higher than the European average yields in the rental sector, which are at 3.25%.

It is not surprising that they are higher because our rents are among the highest in Europe. Rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Dublin is higher than anywhere else in the European Union.

Irish yields compare favourably to Irish sovereign bonds which are in negative territory and they compare favourably to EU sovereign bond yields which were only 0.3% in 2020. These conditions, which include some of the highest rents in Europe, make investment in the private rental sector very favourable for investment funds. They do not need favourable tax treatment on top of that to encourage them. The imbalance that this has created means the Government needs to do the opposite. It needs to dampen the returns for institutional investors from the private rental sector to rebalance housing construction and give people a decent chance of being able to buy their own home.

The analysis that I was referring to by Dr. Michael Byrne from UCD shows that there is consensus in the property industry as to why investment in the private rental sector is such a good option for investment funds. CBRE Ireland stated: "The fundamental issue supporting the investment thesis ... is the inherent supply demand balance in the residential sector". Sherry Fitzgerald stated: "The fundamentals which underpin PRS [private rental sector] demand remain strong, most notably favourable demographic and economic trends, together with a supply shortage, which has been an enduring feature of the market in recent times." Irish Residential Properties REIT stated: "There remains a clear and significant supply and demand imbalance for all tenures of housing in Ireland." A 2020 report by GillenMarkets, a Dublin-based investment advisory firm, stated that Ireland's policy has "benefited ... institutions and developers at the expense of individual buyers." The same report notes that the biggest risk facing investors in Ireland's property market is Government intervention aimed at improving housing affordability. As such, not only is institutional investment supported by favourable tax treatment and investment conditions, it is also supported heavily by a lack of supply to meet demand and a lack of Government intervention to ensure housing affordability.

These are not the only supports for this type of investment. The list goes on. There is a

range of direct State financing and support for this type of investment. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have told us that we must have cuckoo funds in order to provide finance for housing. What they did not tell us is that the State is providing some of the funding to build housing that is then sold on to these investment funds. I already referenced the reports today from the Home Building Finance Agency, which is financing large-scale rental developments that are then being sold on to investment funds. Funding for the agency is coming via the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, from which funding is also going straight into supporting this practice. In addition, long-term leases from the State are guaranteeing rents for many of these investment funds.

According to Dr. Lorcan Sirr of the school of real estate and construction economics at the Technological University Dublin, local authorities are offering exceptional terms to lease new builds from funds, offering rent guarantees, property management and an obligation to return the houses as good as new after 25 years. Dr. Sirr described the deals as “unbelievably good.” I hope we hear from the Government this week what action will be taken on this issue. Analysis by the *Dublin Inquirer* of over 12,000 apartments and homes in Dublin city owned by institutional investors showed that 76% of them were already built when they were bought out by investment funds.

In addition to all of the measures the Government is putting in place to support investment funds, the favourable tax treatment, the lack of intervention on affordable housing, the favourable market conditions, the excellent yields that investors get and the long-term leasing, the Government has also created another incentive for investors to come in and buy up homes. In the immigrant investor programme, the only thing someone has to do to get a passport and citizenship, including for his or her family, is buy two homes valued at €500,000 each. That is why we saw people taking to Twitter last week to say that every time they tried to buy a home, they met the same people who outbid them as they tried to buy up homes for international investors as part of these schemes. If the Government is serious about this, it should exclude house purchasing from this programme immediately.

Another aspect of this is the vacancy created by some of these institutional investors. Reports from RTE show that in two developments belonging to Kennedy Wilson where rents are just under €3,000 a month, at Clancy Quay in Dublin 8 and at Capital Dock, vacancy rates have been up to 50%. With more than 8,000 people in emergency accommodation, including more than 2,000 children, these homes should be put to use and to do that, the owners would have to lower the rents. It is imperative that the Government bring forward a fast and effective vacancy tax to prevent such vacancy from occurring. It has completely failed on this issue.

The Government can do a huge amount to fix this problem. It is doing a huge amount right now to encourage these international investments. We need action on this issue quickly.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Sinn Féin for using its Private Members’ time to raise this important issue.

The Government has learned absolutely nothing from the disastrous mistakes that have led to the current housing crisis. The two mistakes were the disastrous decision to invite in the vulture funds, cuckoo funds and speculators, particularly in 2013 and 2014, and the simultaneous and equally disastrous decision by the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government to essentially stop the building of public housing directly by local authorities. Fianna Fáil started those mistakes when it set up NAMA and increasingly outsourced and cut back the provision of social housing. However, Fine Gael and the Labour Party turned a bad situation into a disaster in 2013-14

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with the two decisions to stop building council housing and to bring in the vulture funds with tax incentives, etc. Those are the reasons.

First, NAMA handed over more than €40 billion worth of land and property assets to these vultures, giving them significant control over the market. It gets worse, however, because these funds are now buying up new builds. We are now being told that despite the disastrous situation these vultures have created, we cannot do without them.

You only need to google the profits of some of these entities - anybody can do it - to see what enormous fortunes they have made. The worse the housing crisis is, the more valuable their assets are, the more profits they make, the more rents they can charge, and the higher the prices of the properties they sell. It is a simple equation. While they control the market, they have no interest in solving the housing crisis. This is the simple truth the Government does not understand.

Now the Government wants to compound this disastrous situation by not only allowing these funds to have control of the private housing sector but to open up the public land bank to them with the Land Development Agency Bill that will go through next week. I cannot ring the alarm bells enough for the public out there about what the Land Development Agency, LDA, is. This is letting the fox into the hen house to plunder all of the public land bank. The one thing that could dampen the market and counteract the influence of these people is for the State, on a large scale, to build its own stock of public and genuinely affordable housing.

I see the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, nod and then I look at the figures for 2020. Last year, 269 council houses were built in the four local authority areas in Dublin where the crisis is most acute. The figures in Galway, Cork and so on are similarly pathetic. In Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown the number is zero. Zero council houses were built. A few were provided by AHBs and most of the rest were provided through HAP or the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, that is, outsourced to these funds that are making a fortune. The result is situations like that faced by residents in St. Helen's Court in Dún Laoghaire, which has been going on for four years. The property was sold by NAMA to Apollo Global Management, represented by PwC. It was flipped on to Mill Street Projects Limited, which has made four attempts to evict the tenants. Some tenants have been driven out while others - ordinary working people - are accused of over-holding and are facing homelessness. The owners want to drive up the value of the property but what has the Government done to stop this? It has done nothing.

What we need is to start building public and affordable housing on public land. We also need punitive taxes on vacant properties and vacant sites and rent controls. We need to stop the tax breaks for these vultures and to completely exclude them from the housing market. Were we to do those things, we could start to solve the housing disaster the Government's policies has created.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. Fianna Fáil's response to this crisis would be laughable if it was not so serious. It was summed up in a tweet by Fianna Fáil MEP, Billy Kelleher, who effectively pointed to what was happening in Maynooth and said "something" must be done but this is Fianna Fáil's policy. It is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policy to incentivise the vulture and cuckoo funds to come in here. Now that the chickens are coming home to roost, the approach of Fianna Fáil is to wring its hands and say that something must be done while simultaneously not doing what obviously needs to be done in terms of excluding these funds from the housing sector. This week we learned that not only is the Minister for

Housing, Local Government and Heritage refusing to ban these cuckoo funds, he was actually an early investor in the cuckoo funds. No wonder he would not evict the vultures; he is one himself.

Fundamentally, the housing crisis comes down to a very simple question, namely, which side are you on? Are you on the side of those struggling to pay rising rents or the corporate landlords making a killing with unprecedented income? Are you on the side of those trying to buy their first home or the cuckoo funds buying up whole estates? Are you on the side of the half a million young people still stuck at home or of the developers who are making massive profits? Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policy has been to invite, encourage and incentivise these vultures into the so-called housing market to turn this country into a cuckoo land.

The outpouring of anger over the last week should be just the beginning. We need a mass movement on housing to scrap all the tax incentives offered to REITs and other investment vehicles and ban them from buying up housing here. Instead of a Government that serves the interests of the landlords, vultures and cuckoos, we need a left Government with socialist policies that will take on the vultures, kick them out and serve the interests of working-class people.

Deputy Mick Barry: Leo Varadkar rolled out the red carpet, Mícheál Martin opened the door and seated the guests while Eoghan Murphy poured the wine but now the Government is throwing its hands up in horror because the guests are eating too much. What the hell did it expect? It gave them everything they wanted. It gave them tax breaks on corporation tax and on capital gains tax. It gave them what they wanted on the rent roll and on stamp duty. Last week the Government said it was going to sort it out but it has not been sorted out yet. It is not a question of clipping the wings of the vulture funds; we want them driven out of the nest, out of the housing market. We need housing for people, not housing for profit. The Government must reverse all of those tax breaks as an immediate first step.

There was some interesting commentary during the week. One chap from County Kildare, who announced his intention to vote Sinn Féin at the next election, although he did not express too much confidence that it would fundamentally change things, said that he wanted a Government to support a policy of not lining the pockets of developers with crazy lease agreements. He wanted a Government that would not put him in a position of choosing between paying some amateur clown's second mortgage or renting from a faceless institution, both insanely at a rate of between 120% to 150% of a typical mortgage on the same property. A poster on Twitter today said that the really problematic joint for young people's mental health is the need for a joint income to get out of their parents' house. A big conversation has started about this. The Government says that housing is now its number one priority. Housing has been the number one priority for a huge number of working people, especially young people, for quite some time. They have more or less got their cards marked at this stage but they will watch this Government to determine which side it is on. Unless the Government shows - I do not believe it will - that it is on the side of working people and young people rather than speculators and cuckoos, then the housing issue, which is a ticking time bomb, could actually blow this Government up.

An Ceann Comhairle: There were probably more avian analogies in those contributions than we have ever heard before. We move on now to the Regional Group and Deputy Verona Murphy.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion, although I do have some sympathy for Fianna Fáil as it has been left with the disastrous housing strategy of the pre-

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vious Fine Gael Government. We now have a planning policy primarily based around transport and climate change for rural towns where no public transport infrastructure exists. We have a policy that has little regard for the social consequences for future generations of low-income families and one that has not been reconsidered in light of the massive changes in society as a result of Covid-19. This policy will change the supply of housing, drive up house prices and destroy towns in rural Ireland. The policy does not, in the majority of cases, allow the building of family homes with front and back gardens. The World Bank has said that the merits of the policy are by no means clear and that it was not evident that its objectives were desired by the majority of urban residents. This policy has failed everywhere and was abandoned by the British in 2010.

On 1 April I addressed the issue of a missive from the Office of the Planning Regulator to Wexford County Council where clearly, the regulator was acting *ultra vires*. Subsequent to that contribution, the regulator issued a deluge of diatribe to the press saying that I was misleading and inaccurate, which is complete rubbish. I had the opportunity to challenge the regulator yesterday when he made a presentation to the Regional Group. The man is incapable of answering a question. It is now clear that the regulator is misleading councillors and politicians the length and breadth of this country. He is completely ignoring the Minister's circular on density issued on 21 April, clearly-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I am loath to interrupt because it could be argued that you are making a political charge but you are effectively making a serious charge against someone outside of the Houses-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: If it is of use to the Ceann Comhairle, I have an opinion of a senior counsel who says the same thing.

An Ceann Comhairle: That still does not cut it. It is not appropriate for us here to effectively launch personal attacks on named or identifiable individuals. I fully accept and sympathise-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: It is not a personal attack.

An Ceann Comhairle: I fully accept and sympathise with the point that you are making but I think you need to be careful.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I am being very careful. I have spent a lot of time on this. He is actually misleading people and refused to acknowledge that yesterday when the evidence was presented. He has presented a letter to Wexford County Council contrary to what the Minister sent to Wexford County Council and refuses to acknowledge it. I will continue, a Cheann Comhairle, bearing in mind that we have had an interruption.

Subsequent to my speech on the floor of the Dáil on 1 April, I procured the opinion of former Attorney General and senior counsel, Senator Michael McDowell. His opinion concluded the regulator was and is acting *ultra vires*. I put that to the regulator, from whom I received no response. I am not alone in my view on the regulator's thoughts. Senior counsel for Cork County Council, in judicial review proceedings, described the regulator's recommendation to the Minister as unlawful, flawed, irrational, of no legal effect and without jurisdiction.

On the same subject, from which the Ceann Comhairle will be glad to hear I am moving on, last night on "Claire Byrne Live", we heard the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, talk about

high-density developments and, in the same breath, about family homes of three or four bed semi-detached houses, probably with gardens. Clearly, the Minister of State is asleep and has not read his own guidelines.

The specific planning policy requirement, SPPR 4, which Mr. Justice Collins referred to as unimplementable, is a specific planning policy requirement - I want the Ministers to listen carefully - to “avoid mono-type building typologies (e.g. two storey or own-door houses only)”. This is the policy of the compact, high-density development that is to apply to every town of more than 5,000 people. Watching the Minister of State last night, it was as plain as a pikestaff he was not aware this SPPR 4 existed. It makes no provision for three or four-bedroom homes. Three or four-bedroom semi-detached homes of the type the Minister of State envisages can be developed in the range of 20 to 30 dwellings per hectare. His policy provides for 35 to 50 and not less than 30, according to the regulator, so I do not envisage any three or four-bedroom semi-detached houses.

The Minister and the regulator refuse to allow local authorities to adopt planning policies to provide for family homes. When will the Government wake up? This regulator will have the policy enshrined in every county development plan before it realises what has happened. The SPPR 4 must be abandoned. It is clear the regulator is the fox in the fowl house of, what is now, Fianna Fáil’s housing policy. The consequence of his interpretation of the Minister’s guidelines will choke housing supply. It will put an end to family homes, increase house prices and create the ghettos of tomorrow. It is the policy that will create the tribunals of tomorrow.

The regulator has refused to debate with me on national radio. Being the cute fox he is, when he is challenged he recoils to his little office in Grangegorman, or probably a big office which is bigger than some of the houses he is proposing.

Who is regulating the regulator? It would appear from his presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, he is the Steve Silvermint of planning. He has come to save us from the darkest days of the planning tribunals. I hope the Taoiseach will not be faced with the surprise that faced him in this House last week, when he realised the effect of the policies of this Government in real terms, in that county councils are taking long-term leases from cuckoo funds.

The Government needs to have an epiphany in relation to the planning regulator and deal with the red fox in the fowl house. If it does not, there will be few if any family homes. Towns will be ghettoised and there will not be a GAA team left in rural Ireland.

I apologise to my colleague.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy was in full flight.

Deputy Seán Canney: I presume I will get an extra bit of time due to the pause.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will give Deputy Canney a little flexibility.

Deputy Seán Canney: While the housing crisis seems to have caught the imagination of everybody in a very short time, it has been with us but has been hidden behind Covid-19 for the past year.

There is a huge emphasis on new houses, but we have a challenge and a potential within that challenge, in that we have over 2,000 vacant properties in this country. The Society of Char-

tered Surveyors Ireland has stated that 75% of the space above ground floor retail in Dublin is empty. There are reasons all of that is happening. When we are looking at policies or ways to get houses built and young people and first-time buyers housed, there is potential to do things quickly.

As I have said previously, the help to buy scheme should be expanded to include first-time buyers of vacant properties in order that they can bring them back into use as homes, especially in our towns and villages. If we do that, there will be a threefold benefit. First, first-time buyers will have a home at an affordable price. Second, we will rejuvenate our towns and villages by bringing these houses back into use. Third, we will reduce our CO2 emissions because we will have the foundations in, the walls built and the roofs on the houses. We need to spend the money on retrofitting these houses and assist in that regard. We have a deep retrofit scheme and we should encourage first-time buyers to use it for these properties.

If we are serious, we have options other than creating policies and a land development agency which will develop sites and so on. The reality is the cost of building new houses is way beyond the reach of most people, whether it is couples or single people trying to get a mortgage. It is not the fault of developers or anyone, but we are now building houses to a standard that is increasing the cost.

We need to look at this issue in a rational way. How else can we do this? There is no town or village in this country that does not have vacant properties. We need to incentivise first-time buyers to get involved in taking over these properties, creating homes, regenerating towns and, at the same time, helping the Minister to solve this problem and doing it quickly.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this important motion because this is such an important issue. It is beyond belief that, in the world we are living in today, these groups can come into Ireland, buy up vast amounts of property, earn money and pay no tax. I just cannot understand that. I cannot understand why a government - past, present or future - would want to allow that to continue. Why would it want this unfair advantage to be given to companies over our own people who want to buy their own properties?

I deal with young couples every day of the week who are starting out in life, working hard and want to get on the property ladder by purchasing their own homes but are being denied that opportunity because the property prices are rising so much due to these groups coming in and buying hundreds of properties at the same time.

It is unhelpful - I heard it earlier - to hear speakers who are opposed to this motion attacking Sinn Féin for highlighting this matter tonight. I do not agree with that. It is not a good way to do our business. Everybody here should support this motion and, failing that, they should make amendments if they think they can make it better. They should not criticise it for the sake of criticising it because they do not like the fact that Sinn Féin is bringing it forward. That is not right. I do not care who brings forward the motion. I believe it deserves to be supported.

We should be making it possible in every way for our young people to get on the property ladder and for work to be rewarded. I hear people saying prices of €400,000, €450,000 or €500,000 are affordable. They are not affordable homes. It is not realistic for young people to purchase or get a mortgage for that amount. The banks are making it extremely difficult for young people. I deal with young couples who are working diligently, have two wages coming in and have saved as much as they can but they are still being denied a mortgage. That is not

right. It was easier to get on the property ladder many years ago when people had less money. That is not right and does not make sense. I ask the Minister to please take on board the merits of this argument and what we are trying to achieve here for young people.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this very important motion. The Ministers for Finance and Housing, Local Government and Heritage know as well as everyone else that these investment firms are bidding against young couples for single houses and blowing them out of the market. That is wrong. The Ministers are saying they are going to rectify it and I hope they do that because they must.

Young couples are facing many real obstacles to put a roof over their heads. First, there is the problem of getting planning permission and zoning. They go through hell and high water to get planning permission. The planning regulator is not being fair and is dezoning land. In one instance a few years ago, Mick O'Connell, the best footballer that ever graced the fields of this country, got Killorglin Town Council to vote to zone a bit of land for him for a small number of houses. The planning regulator did not even know where Valentia Island was but he insisted that Kerry County Council rescind that zoning and Mick O'Connell was stopped in his tracks.

There are other issues, for example, the increase in material costs, as well as levies and taxes. We have great local builders like Michael Jack Cronin, who has done great work in recent times. The Government must go back to the traditional way of house building, which was to give the local authorities funds to build houses. The Government is also blocking the tenant purchase scheme and stopping tenants from purchasing their houses, which they did traditionally over the years and there was nothing wrong with that. Any house built since 2015 is not allowed to be bought out. We should go back to that old system. The banks are messing people around.

Deputy Michael Collins: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have blamed each other for the current housing crisis, which has seen thousands of homes end up in the hands of global investment funds. These funds are commonly referred to as either vulture funds, which tend to buy up distressed mortgages, or cuckoo funds, which are buying up new housing estates and apartments and of which every person in the country is now well aware. If this matter were not so serious, one might be forgiven for finding it rather amusing, or even childish. If Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are looking for someone to blame, they should look inwards for they are both to blame for this issue. This crisis, which will likely worsen, is inextricably joined at the hip with the banking crisis of over a decade ago. Let us not forget what is happening in our local towns and villages, where Bank of Ireland branches are closing, including one in Bantry and another in Dunmanway in my constituency.

Much has been made over the past week of the fact that global investment funds are buying up entire housing estates and apartment blocks in Ireland. Such unethical activity is depriving families and young people of owning an affordable home and is driving up prices, on both the rental and purchase sides. In my constituency, there are people trying to rent, buy a property or build a home but it is impossible. Sadly, the same mistakes have been made every single day at Government level.

Who are these investment funds? Many US, EU and, increasingly, Chinese investment funds are investing in Ireland. While investment should generally be welcomed, when that investment becomes number one in the world for tax evasion purposes, it should be questioned. For instance, these funds have been given unique tax treatment. They pay no tax and are given

an array of special incentives by the Government. It is like a loophole in the law.

There is another very serious issue on which the State has to step in. In Baltimore an individual is buying between 25 and 55 acres of rock on some hill, which is of no benefit to anybody, and then selling every acre on DoneDeal for €5,000. All sorts of unsociable people are purchasing a piece of rock for €5,000 and turning up in a beautiful place like Baltimore. I ask the State to intervene on that issue, which I will be taking up with the Minister. The crisis that has emerged in the last week is scandalous beyond belief.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. The Minister for Housing Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, Deputy John McGuinness, mé féin and Senator David Norris, with the help of Edmund Honohan, the highly respected Master of the High Court, brought forward the Affordable Housing and Fair Mortgage Bill in 2018. The skullduggery and blackguarding that went on inside Fianna Fáil to nobble Deputy McGuinness and stop that Bill in its tracks, from the Taoiseach down, was nothing short of scandalous.

It was said earlier that today is Seán Lemass's 50th anniversary. Fianna Fáil was the party of house building and home building and looking after the ordinary people, na daoine óga agus na daoine beaga. Where is it gone? I thought Fianna Fáil learned something from the housing crisis, the bust and the brown envelopes of the Celtic tiger. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is no longer here. A blind man could see what is going on. People talk about cuckoo funds. A cuckoo used to live in Kilnacarriga in the purple heather. It made a lovely sound. It is an insult to call these funds after that wonderful bird, which is welcome to our shores every year. The cuckoo funds are not welcome and nor are the vulture funds that came before them.

This issue has been going on since the banking crisis, with people being turfed out of their homes down in the courts. All through the pandemic, people were being evicted and homes were being taken off people. Banks are now putting properties and farms up for sale on the web at midnight or 11 o'clock at night. The first the owners know of it is when a neighbour sees it and rings them up, then it is gone and sold to a vulture fund. This is a brazen sell-out of our people, who Dan Breen, Seán Treacy, Seán MacDermott and Pádraig Pearse fought for. The Government should be ashamed to claim to represent a democratic Ireland under this kind of watch. It welcomes in all these gangsters and funds that are raping and plundering our country. We kept Cromwell out of parts of Tipperary but now we cannot do this on our own, in this modern-day democracy. We celebrate the centenary of independence this year. My God, they are turning in their graves. It is so sad.

This is not rocket science. Prices are spiralling for people who want to build their own houses. The cost of insulation has spiralled because of the carbon tax the Government has imposed. The Government does not have the foggiest idea. This is criminal and Government members should be brought before the Nuremburg tribunals for destroying our people and driving them to suicide due to their mental and physical health issues. Above all, the Government has had the cover of the famous plandemic for the last 13 months. It thought it could extend it and hide everything behind it but now it is being found out because the foxes, bears and otters are inside the hen house and all the hens are being plucked. The Government will be plucked too.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion, which I fully support. I missed the beginning of the debate so I am not sure whether the Government is agreeing with the motion. The Minister might clarify that.

I am sick and tired of the mantra and ideology coming from both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, through the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach, that we are ideologues on this side of the House. I have repeatedly said that I am a proud Galwegian and a practical, pragmatic politician. Since the day I came into this House in February 2016, I have begged and implored, tabled motions with my colleagues and joined with other motions, to highlight the housing crisis. We have appealed to the Government to have a referendum and place the right to housing in the Constitution because a home is a basic human right. The most fundamental things required by people are shelter and security so that they can participate actively in a democracy. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have repeatedly demonised us, laughed at us and placed us in a box - all inappropriately - to justify their housing programme, which is not sustainable.

In Galway, people have been on a waiting list for a house for 15 years. I do not need to exaggerate because the figures speak for themselves. Once, councillors could go with applicants to the city council and give them some hope, telling them that if they did their time on the list they would get a house in seven to ten years. At least they could do that. Not alone is that chance gone, but now the council will not even facilitate us with a meeting. That is now gone completely, and was gone well before the onset of Covid-19.

We had a construction programme in Galway. It is important to give a context because this crisis has not just arisen. Someone referred to it as just becoming more focused lately. This is a crisis which has been created by ongoing Government policy. The policy was to stop building public housing and to hand over the process, lock, stock and barrel, to investment funds with various names to look after homes and provide them in any manner they saw fit. That is what happened.

I spent 17 years of my life at local authority level. We fought to make it more accountable. We fought to get quarterly reports, which, in fairness, the management gave us. It told us what the problem was, the solution and the construction programme. From 2009 onwards, the category for housing construction was suspended. That continued in 2009, 2010 and thereafter until April 2019 when the Government was forced to set up a task force. I have begged and implored the Minister for access to the various letters and he has finally given them to me. I would not call them reports. I thank him for giving them to me and I have read them all. I would have thought, however, that a task force, by its very nature, was a recognition that there was a problem, and that the nature of the problem would then be analysed and solutions devised. What seems to have happened here, however, is that the task force is ongoing, with many meetings receiving many presentations. However, that could have been done at council level. What we wanted from a task force was an analysis of the problem. The Minister does not have to agree with me but surely an analysis of the problem is the most basic requirement before we can deal with the solution.

I will raise again the Simon Communities in Ireland report. It regularly does a three-day snapshot. In March 2021, its snapshot looked at 16 areas all over the country. With regard to Galway, it found "There was an average of 65 properties available to rent in Galway City Centre over the study period, similar to the 62 properties available in the December 2020 study". Can we imagine that? It also noted that only two properties fitted into at least one housing assistant payment, HAP, category. This was "the first time a property has been within a HAP limit in six study periods". We will return to the HAP in a minute. Even with the system in place, however, no houses are available under any of the categories in Galway, except one or two.

All the details about Galway are here in the Simon Communities in Ireland report, Locked

11 May 2021

Out of the Market Study March 2021, in table 12 for Galway city centre and table 13 for Galway city suburbs. I invite the Minister to look at those tables. Before he makes comments again about those of us on this side of the House being ideologues, he might look at this report and make his comments relate to reality. The reality is that we are down to one or two properties being available under the HAP limits in Galway city, and that has been repeatedly the case with these snapshot studies. In addition, rents in Galway have gone up and up. They came down a little in Dublin but have gone up by 4.6% in Galway city.

Some progress has been made, and I thank the task force and management in that regard. It is not, however, progress of the type we need to sort out the housing crisis. The State must be central to the policy. Housing is not a commodity to be traded and given over to investment funds. It is a basic human right. That is where we differ. People should be given choices of whether to buy or rent a house, depending on the different stages of their lives. They should not be forced into a mortgage for any number of years to suit the ideology of the Government. We should of course support and encourage people to purchase houses. However, that should be done on a balanced basis, with the State building public housing for everyone to give them a choice and change the limits.

Fine Gael and the Labour Party brought in the HAP system in 2014 or thereabouts. From that point onwards, the Government gave up any pretence of building houses. Not alone did it do that but anyone who went on to the HAP was taken off the housing waiting list. I spent much of my time arguing over this point. I was told I was a liar. I have pointed out in the past that, no, I was a lawyer at that point and while there might be some overlap between liars and lawyers, I was not lying. That was the type of idiocy we had to go through because of the policy on HAP, where the Government wanted to hide the fact that people came off the housing waiting list.

From the Committee of Public Accounts, we knew that HAP payments were rising. My colleagues and I were laughed at when we said that the Government was bolstering the market. When I looked at the report from the task force, I found out that the average top-up payment in Galway is €56 per week from the tenant. That is the average top-up. These used to be hidden, under-the-counter payments. Now, they are over-the-counter payments. Rent for a two-bedroom house in my area in Galway city is €2,000. It is nothing short of scandalous.

What am I asking for? I am not asking to argue. I am not asking to roar and shout. I am asking the Minister to recognise that there is a housing crisis and that the Government must be central to the solution by building public housing on public land.

In the minute and a bit left to me, I return to the situation in Galway. I attended a presentation on the redevelopment of the harbour in the city recently and what is planned in that regard. At least 17 acres are redundant to need and the land is now to be sold off to the highest bidder or a deal will be done with the Land Development Agency rather than hand over that land to the city council, when we have a housing crisis. Ceannt Station is also being developed, and that is a developer-led project on fantastic land in the middle of the city. There is no provision for social or public housing and no master plan for that site. The university is developing a plan for another area, Nuns' Island, and the city council is undertaking work as part of the Dyke Road and Sandy Road regeneration plan as well.

We have land now. The task force tells us it will run out in 2023. In the meantime, what land we have we are allowing the harbour company to sell off to the highest bidder. We are also allowing all the other developments to go ahead with no master plan, city architect, overall

vision or recognition that public land is essential to the solution of our housing crisis. I have repeatedly raised this issue, and I make no apology for doing so. I will continue to raise it for as long as I have a voice in this Dáil. The Minister should not insult me and my colleagues by telling us we are ideologues because it twists language on its head. The Government is the ideologue, and every policy it has pursued is for the market.

In my last ten seconds, I finish with a quote from Dr. Michael Byrne of the school of social policy in UCD. He points out regarding the Government's housing policy, that investment in the private rental market is "a major new development in the Irish housing system, and one which is likely to shape how Irish cities develop in future". He continues: "*The Strategy for the Rental Sector* document (Department of Housing, 2016b: 17), for example, highlights the benefits of institutional provision of rental housing in terms of its capacity". It then comes as a surprise to the Government that the investment funds are buying up estates and apartments.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank the Acting Chair for the opportunity to respond to the different points made, and, indeed, to respond to some of the charges made against the Government, my party and the Ministers working on responding to the great challenge we face.

Let me begin by making it completely clear where this Government and I stand and where previous Governments have stood, and whose side we are on. We are on the side of those seeking to be able to rent a home at an affordable price and those seeking to buy their first home at an affordable price. They are the people this Government is serving. When the Government is looking at the right policies that need to be put in place to meet those needs, they are the people who we have at the centre of our planning and our thinking.

That is not just a claim on behalf of me or the Government, it is matched by actions that we have taken and changes that have happened. I can see it at first hand in my constituency in the lives of those who I serve and represent. I know the challenges faced by those who look at how they are going to pay their rent every month, worry that the rent is going to increase in the future and wonder how they will ever be in a position whereby they will be able to set aside money for the deposit for a mortgage. I know what it is like when I knock on the door of a home and meet people who have been on a Dublin City Council housing waiting list for years and are wondering when that new home is going to become available. Equally, however, I know and can see the difference that policies have made, and will make again, to those households.

I see homes currently being built in Dominick Street by the State. It is being supported in the delivery of those homes, the purpose of which is to meet current needs, by city council. I see the work that is under way at O'Devaney Gardens. I see the commitment in respect of the redevelopment of St. Mary's Mansions and what has happened there. That is not consistent with the rhetoric to the effect that this Government is not playing its role in meeting housing needs. The homes to which I refer are being built on behalf of the State to meet the needs that are there, that are growing and that are the cause of such anxiety for so many. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage visited and opened the redeveloped St. Mary's Mansions. I see the difference that project has made, at the very heart of the Dublin Central constituency, in Sean McDermott Street. It was a project that for so long was a sign of how progress was not being made. To see that project actually being delivered is not a sign of a State that is subcontracting out its responsibilities in the context of meeting housing needs in Ireland. It is the sign of a State that is meeting those needs directly. The previous Government sought to do it and this Government will continue to do it, and will find ways to do it more effectively.

If that is the reality of what I see in the context of houses that are being built and needs that we must meet, and I know that we must meet many needs and do even more, it is also the case - and the figures are there - regarding homes that were being built before the pandemic hit. There is also the intention that the Government has to directly build more homes this year. I heard speaker after speaker this evening ask why the State is not playing a role and why it is not responding directly to the needs that exist. In 2019, before the pandemic hit our country, more than 5,000 homes were built by the State in response to existing needs. This year, despite all of the challenges that we are facing in opening up our construction sector, the closure of which was supported by many who have spoken this evening, the Government is still aiming to meet the demanding goal of delivering 9,500 homes, either directly or indirectly. That is the reality of what is happening. Even with all of the challenges we have faced and are facing in the context of Covid when it comes to reopening up our construction sector and getting it up and running again, it is still the case that the single biggest provider of homes in the country this year, either directly or indirectly, will be the Government. I heard speaker after speaker ask where the Government is. That is where the Government is. The meeting of housing needs in this way this year, the commitments that have been made, the work that is being led by the Minister, supported by a housing budget of over €3 billion to continue to build on this work and meet the needs that are there, is the sign of an active Government and the role that it is determined to play.

To deal with the issue that also lies at the core of this matter, namely, the role of institutional investors, the role they have to play and the debate that has taken place about that this evening in recent days, I highlight the following. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage recently published its housing demand needs analysis, which highlights the fact that 33,000 homes need to be delivered here. The analysis makes the point that 18,400 of those homes will either need to be delivered through the private rental market or will need to be built by the private sector for people to buy and own. Ours is a small economy, and one with two banks that will be active in the coming years in meeting the needs that exist. If we do not have an economy that is big enough to meet, for example, the employment needs of our society - which is why there is a role for foreign direct investment within our country - and the need for a private sector that uses private capital to add to the efforts of the Government, then there is a role for large investors and pension funds to play in meeting those needs within the parameters of a legal and regulatory framework that is put in place by the Government.

As the Minister indicated, and I want to reiterate this point, we are looking at measures that can be taken to deal with incidents such as that which happened recently and which was reported on last weekend. I understand why this matter is of concern and how families feel when they worry that they will be priced out of the market and will not be able to buy a house and call it a home for life. We understand that. That is why the Government is looking at options in respect of how we can deal with this issue. The Minister and I are working on that at the moment. We will do that work and we will complete it. For those who have made the charge this evening that the State should not allow these investors into our country, that they should play no part at all in meeting the needs that exist, there is a question that falls to them to answer. If we want to make progress in dealing with the rental needs of a generation that needs more apartments at rents that are affordable, does the private sector have a role to play? Is there a role at all for investors of scale to become landlords that are able to meet needs and provide rental accommodation in large numbers? In the same way that we look to international investors to become involved in our economy, the State will set up a framework in which that can be done in this sector. We will deal with, and look to make progress on, the issue that has been of such

concern to so many and that has provoked and incited the need for the kind of debate we are having this evening and the motion that has been put forward.

I will go back to where I began. What is motivating this Government and all of its efforts, is meeting the housing needs that are there. We know that they are growing. We know how high is the level of anxiety among those who are renting and who are worried that their rent will go up or that they may not be able to own homes in the future. The answer to dealing with much of that is in how we increase supply. The Government will play our role in that regard. We are playing our role through the scale of the housing budget that is in place. We will continue to look at the framework that is in place and how it can be strengthened to channel in investment in such a way that it can meet the need for more homes. That is the mission of this Government and it is what the Minister and I are working together to deliver.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is very telling that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage spent far more time misrepresenting Sinn Féin housing policy than he did addressing the issue at hand. What is remarkable about that is that when the Minister was in opposition, he was the arch-enemy of what he at that time called the cuckoo funds. He tabled legislation which he said would clip their wings and he campaigned on an election manifesto which guaranteed action to ensure that no single buyer could purchase large numbers of homes that were not intended for the build-to-rent sector.

Despite this staunch opposition to what he then called cuckoo funds, when the programme for Government was negotiated, there was not a single mention of the issue. The Minister must have forgotten about it or else he decided the promises he made to get elected were no longer valuable. The only reason the Minister and his colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, are even considering this matter now is the huge public anger at the failure of the Government to keep its word. People do not want bluff and bluster. They want action and they will judge the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, by what he does.

With respect to the Minister for Finance, the difficulty is that by every single indicator from the beginning of the ten years of Fine Gael in government until now, the housing crisis is worse. Homeless levels, rents and house prices are higher. The Minister is right in one aspect. If we are arguing that high-yield, short-term, speculative investment funds are the wrong kind of investment, then where will the money come from to build the homes? It is a very reasonable question, although the Minister knows we have answered it repeatedly. The first answer is that the State needs to do far more than it is doing. Half of all the social and affordable homes that are required should be fully funded by the State. The Government should do what the ESRI advised and double capital investment in public housing from €1.2 billion to €2.8 billion. It also needs to start attracting the right kind of private sector investment, instead of investment that leads to rents in Dublin city centre of €2,500 to €3,000 and pushes house prices up to €350,000 to €450,000. That is the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael way. Let us have more public investment and the right kind of private investment to deliver the homes working people desperately need and rightly deserve.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Tonight, people in my constituency of Kildare North are reeling. The raid on houses by global wealth funds has left them stunned. As Deputy Ó Broin pointed out, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has gone back on what was set out in the Fianna Fáil manifesto. Instead of clipping wings, as promised, he has given wings to the wealth funds. This is the Red Bull Government. A total of 135 homes were scooped out of 170 in a housing

development in my constituency. Fianna Fáil promised to ring-fence a miserly 30% of homes for ordinary buyers and workers who keep our economy going. In fact, the Minister gifted the investors 79% of the homes in Mullen Park. He might as well have walked into that development and put up a big sign saying “No mortgage holders need apply”. Did we ever think we would see the day that people would need a war fund to buy a house, not in Monte Carlo but in Maynooth in County Kildare? This is the Minister’s doing. His legacy is a housing market that is mutant and its priorities perverse. The full pamper package is provided for investors but workers can go to hell. Not even the bank of mammy and daddy can save them now. They must be good little tenants and pay the mortgage for the wealth fund investors.

I commend Deputies Doherty and Ó Broin on their tireless work in seeking to call a halt to the sweet deals and pamper packages. Our Private Members’ motion would see the cuckoo funds hit with a stamp duty surcharge for raiding residential property. It would put a smacht on their activities and ensure they cannot push people out of homes and install profit in their place. A home is not an option or luxury for people. A home is essential. Having a roof over our head is one of our most basic needs. We must have a radical rethink of our official attitude to housing whereby a few privileged and pampered investors are deciding where many hard-working and unpampered young people can live. Now is the time for big government. A house is a home, not an investment. Big government will save young people and couples from falling through the cracks of this awful Government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gabhaim buíochas le achan duine a labhair sa díospóireacht in-niu, go háirithe na Teachtaí a thug tacaíocht don rún os ár gcomhair. I listened to the words of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and, to say the God’s honest truth, if the situation were not as serious and if so many people had not had their hopes, dreams and aspirations dashed as a result of Government policy, they would be laughable. Here is a Fianna Fáil Minister, himself an investor at the peak of the boom in regard to one of these REITs, talking about Sinn Féin and others in opposition engaging in slash and burn politics. This is a Minister whose party’s policies, as has been well established, fuelled the housing crisis. Fianna Fáil’s policies in the aftermath of the financial crisis slashed and burned the incomes of people right across the State and, unfortunately, left many people with no option but to emigrate from the country in which they were born.

The Minister lectures Sinn Féin without coming forward with any proposal of his own. He took issue with our opposing the shared equity scheme. Let me point out that we are very proud to oppose that scheme.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: The Deputy and his party oppose everything.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I will explain it to him in case he does not understand. The reason we oppose the shared equity scheme is very simple. We believe it risks increasing house prices for people who are already locked out of the market. The Minister need not take our word for it. The Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, the ESRI and the Central Bank have all warned him about the scheme. He can do his amused thing all he wants but people are suffering as a result of the policies of his party and Fine Gael. He might think it is a game in here but it is no game for people who are paying sky-high rents and are locked out of the property market.

One would swear that butter would not melt in the mouth of the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and all he wants to do is make sure people have a home. Since 2016, I have

been telling and warning him that the experiment with REITs and IREFs in this country has failed. I told him that they are squeezing out first-time buyers and those who want to purchase their own home. I told him they are dominating the market, particularly in Dublin. In 2019, six out of every ten new homes that were sold in Dublin did not even come onto the market. The funds snatched them up and the Minister knows damn well why. They did so because he has created a tax-free environment that incentivises this type of investment and ownership. Those same funds then charge sky-high rents.

The Government is adamant its strategy is right but it is running around like a headless chicken. What happened in Maynooth was a lightning rod for the people of this State, who are very angry that rents are so high. They are angry that their sons and daughters are locked out of home ownership. They are angry that there is no chance of any ordinary person owning a property in Dublin or, indeed, the commuter belt. They are angry that the policies of the Government are fuelling this scenario and that it has encouraged and rolled out the red carpet for the vulture funds that are benefiting from and profiting off this situation. Mullen Park was the lightning rod but what happened there has been going on for ages in different estates. The Minister is trying to convince us that we need this type of investment to ensure developers can build estates. He is conflating two different issues. Private rental sales do not fund developments. These funds give no money to the developer to finance building. All they do is purchase the properties after they are built and pay for them at that stage. The developer gets the money from international finance, the banks and other sources. There is no issue with that. It is not the private rental sales that fund these developments. All they do is come in at an early stage and say they will buy the properties from the developer when they are finished, and they pay up when the properties are completed.

That has been happening right across the board, not just in the case of Mullen Park in Maynooth a couple of weeks ago. In 2019, there were 2,909 new homes sold in private rental sales, mainly to these funds, as well as 3,039 second-hand homes. Where was the Minister's outrage in regard to the XVI portfolio that saw 765 homes sold to IRES REIT in 2019? What about the Vert project that saw 385 homes in Leopardstown sold to funds in June the same year? Also in 2019, 370 homes were sold to the funds under Project Turner. In Heuston South Quarter, 266 homes were snatched up by the funds in the same year, locking out first-time buyers, and another 222 homes were sold under the Belgrave Collection. I could go on to name 42 other transactions totalling 5,700 homes bought up by the funds in 2019 alone.

The problem is not just that these funds are buying up properties. They are pushing up the price of a home by paying more than €80,000 above market price, thereby creating a new ceiling and locking out people. The Minister thinks this is okay because, somehow, €450,000 is an affordable price to pay for a house. He is living in cloud cuckoo land.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have been putting forward the proposals set out in this motion year after year in the debate on the Finance Bill. Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party voted against even looking at the idea of additional stamp duty on these types of funds just six months ago. Those parties voted against even looking at that because they want the *status quo*. Now, because of the public anger, they are running around like headless chickens. There are proposals here to deal with this issue. The Government should support this motion and stop these funds from squeezing out first-time buyers.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 12 May 2021.

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Foreign Conflicts

47. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions he plans to take on the international stage to put a halt to the support being offered to the Ethiopian Government and Eritrean forces engaged in a systematic campaign of violence in Tigray by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, particularly given Ireland's long partnership with Ethiopia and role on the United Nations Security Council. [24129/21]

Deputy John Brady: What actions does the Minister plan to take on the international stage to put a halt to the humanitarian crisis that has been unfolding in the Tigray region of Ethiopia over the past number of months? It has involved a number of international actors. What actions does the Minister intend to take on the international stage?

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank the Deputy for asking this question. What has been happening in Tigray is quite shocking. I remain deeply concerned by the ongoing conflict, which has seen many people killed, injured and displaced, and which is feeding into instability across the Horn of Africa.

Since joining the UN Security Council, Ireland has worked consistently to ensure a focus on the conflict in Ethiopia, initiating discussions at the Council in February and March, and leading negotiations that led to the adoption of a press statement on the situation in Tigray on 22 April, the first time the Council has spoken publicly on the crisis. We will work to ensure the Council maintains its focus on this pressing issue.

An immediate ceasefire is the most important step all parties can take. In this regard, it is imperative that Eritrean forces leave Tigray immediately. The humanitarian situation in Tigray continues to be extremely difficult, in particular the situation of internally displaced persons. My Department, through the Irish Aid programme, has so far provided over €3.2 million to support the vital humanitarian response on the ground.

There are multiple credible and harrowing reports of ongoing human rights violations, including, in particular, sexual violence being used as a tool of war in Tigray. I strongly support the work of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, working with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, to investigate reported atrocities. I continue to engage with a range of key interlocutors in the region and the African Union. There is significant Gulf engagement in the Horn of Africa and I have discussed the situation in Tigray with the foreign minister of the

United Arab Emirates.

The EU is also engaging with the Gulf states on the situation. Finland's foreign minister has visited the region twice on behalf of the EU, including visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE which examined the ways in which Gulf countries can play a constructive role in addressing the Tigray crisis. Ireland will continue to avail of all opportunities to raise our concerns on the Tigray crisis in our bilateral contacts with Gulf interlocutors and at UN and EU levels.

Deputy John Brady: As the Minister is aware, this is one of the world's gravest humanitarian and human rights crises. He mentioned that sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war, which is absolutely appalling. I welcome the statement by the UN Security Council and the work that went into drafting it but, unfortunately, it did not go far enough because it did not mention the international actors involved in the situation. We see the situation with Eritrea. For the first time on 23 April, there was acknowledgement that Eritrea had troops within the Tigray region. A commitment was made to start withdrawing those troops but that has not happened. I have had a briefing from the former Ethiopian minister for foreign affairs, Berhane Gebre-Christos. He has said that the Eritrean area is being used by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to fly drones into the Tigray area, which has been integral to, and instrumental in, the destruction that has added to the humanitarian crisis and the number of deaths in the area. More action needs to be taken to put pressure on the international actors in this horrific conflict.

Deputy Simon Coveney: In order to get a unanimous statement at the UN Security Council, compromises sometimes have to be made. We had choices to make. We could write a statement that Ireland would have written on its own and to which very few would have been listening, or we could write a statement through negotiation with the other 14 member states, in particular the five permanent member states and the three African members of the Security Council. We did the latter. The statement was strong, particularly on sexual violence, the need for an independent investigation and the need for humanitarian access to all of the Tigray region, which has been hugely problematic. We could not get a clear wording on the need for Eritrean troops to leave into the statement but I, separately, have been publicly vocal on that matter, as has the European Union. We are continuing to work with our colleagues in the European Union to keep the Ethiopian Government in the spotlight in order to ensure it does everything that is appropriate on this issue. Most importantly, we must continue to advocate at all levels for a ceasefire across the board and for a full, independent investigation so we can hold to account the people who have committed crimes against humanity. There is certainly growing evidence, particularly in the case of sexual violence, that crimes have been committed against humanity.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister for the response. Ireland has a key role to play to bring about a ceasefire and a lasting settlement to the conflict in the region, given the considerable humanitarian assistance Ireland has provided to Ethiopia, particularly the Tigray region, over many decades. We have a key role to play in that regard. There is worrying information on the crisis. I have spoken to experienced commentators who say they are convinced that the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, has no intention whatsoever of entering into dialogue with people in Tigray. There are also concerns that the West is afraid to push the Prime Minister too far because there is no one there, effectively, to replace him. There are suggestions that the West is essentially prepared to sacrifice the Tigray region to try to keep the Prime Minister in place. It is worrying. We need to do more and to be more vocal on the Security Council.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I agree with some of what the Deputy has said but strongly disagree with other elements of it. Ireland's relationship with Ethiopia goes back many years.

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Our development assistance programme and partnerships with Ethiopia are stronger than with any other African country and have been for many years. In fact, we had workers in the Tigray region when the violence started. It is a country we know well and with which we have had a long and strong relationship. That is one of the reasons Ireland is credible in its criticism and its insistence on shining a spotlight on what is happening in the Tigray region. We will continue to do that.

I do not think it is in anybody's interests to see a collapse of the Ethiopian Government. It is a very large country that is broken into many different, quite powerful regions and, therefore, maintaining a government within Ethiopia is important. However, we must ensure that we hold people to account in the context of what has happened in the Tigray region. Ireland has been very outspoken in that regard.

Foreign Conflicts

48. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the situation in the area Sheikh Jarrah used to resettle expelled Palestinian refugees in 1956, that 28 Palestinian families long promised legal titles to their homes are now the target of eviction proceedings by the Israeli authorities and new settlers there; the action he has taken at EU and UN level to highlight this injustice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23901/21]

Deputy Brendan Howlin: How are the Minister and the Government addressing the completely unacceptable situation in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, where mass evictions and dispossession of Palestinians is ongoing contrary to international law? Since I tabled the question, of course, matters have taken a most dangerous and appalling course, making the Minister's response all the more urgent.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am deeply concerned by the escalation of violence in Jerusalem in recent days, the launching of rockets from Gaza and the actions of the Israeli defence forces. Many were shocked at reports of 24 Palestinians being killed last night, including nine children. I believe those figures are now higher. The latest figures, which I received a number of hours ago, were that 28 people were killed, ten of whom were children. I also mention the launching of a rocket from Gaza at a school in southern Israel this morning, and at a residential area this afternoon in which two Israelis were killed. I also understand that in the past hour, quite a number of other Israelis, including possibly a child, have been killed from rocket fire.

I met the Israeli ambassador this afternoon to convey Ireland's position on this and recent tensions and violence. I underlined the need for the Israeli authorities to behave responsibly and protect all civilians in line with their obligations under international law.

Provocations and clashes in East Jerusalem, which led to many being injured at the holy site of Haram al-Sharif, or Temple Mount, are deeply worrying. In my view, the approach of the Israeli authorities and security forces was not acceptable in that context.

On the question of Sheikh Jarrah, I am aware of the long-standing threat of eviction faced by Palestinian residents in this neighbourhood. I have urged Israel to cease evictions and demolitions. Yesterday at the EU Foreign Affairs Council, I highlighted the issues surrounding illegal settlements, including evictions and seizures of property, which are a major driver of genuine

conflict and an obstacle to peace. This morning, Ireland's representative office in Ramallah visited the site along with other diplomatic representatives. Irish officials continue to closely monitor the situation with concern.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We are now witnessing the worst unrest in years. It is escalating further with the Israeli Prime Minister threatening ongoing and deepening air raids in Gaza and scores of rockets being launched by Hamas on Jerusalem itself, both shocking and appalling actions.

There is a root cause, however. I listened to the Israeli ambassador to Britain last night being unable to say that her government is in favour of a two-state solution. We need to get back to the root cause, which is the respect of fundamental rights for Palestinians, that the rule of law applies internationally and that people with legitimate tenancy and rights of tenure are allowed to live where they have lived for decades and not be faced with forced evictions. We now need a concerted effort by Ireland leading in the UN to resolve these matters.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I agree with the Deputy. Believe me when I say that Ireland is very involved in the UN Security Council in these matters. Ireland co-sponsored an emergency discussion at the council yesterday when the situation was not as dramatic as it is now. Ireland is working this evening as we speak. I spoke to our representative in New York who heads our Security Council team, which is speaking to other countries right now regarding how the council may be able to respond more directly and more successfully to what is clearly an increasing spiral of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Yesterday at the Security Council, Ireland underlined that Israeli actions in East Jerusalem and at the Al-Aqsa compound were not acceptable and seen by many as provocative, and of course, continued to call on Israel to comply with international law.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I thank the Minister for the reply. We really need to be proactive on this because the Irish people have very clear views. Stun grenades in the Al-Aqsa mosque were a provocation that was obviously going to have a reaction. There must be a consequence to all this, however. Repeatedly, violations of human rights, suppression of rights and the killing of children seem to have nothing other than international condemnation as a result. There is no consequence to this.

We must now resolve ourselves to be firm and clear that we will work with like-minded governments, not only in the EU but across the world, and perhaps, there will be a change of view in the new US administration, to try to advance the two-state solution, which will respect the rights of both communities and bring peace to this region once and for all.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I hope my position on this issue has been very consistent. We have and continue to advocate for a two-state solution on the basis of a negotiation where equality of esteem between both sides is respected. That certainly has not been the case in recent years.

I continue to be outspoken on the illegality of settlements in occupied territory and their expansion, the forced removal of Palestinians from their homes and the demolition of buildings. Of course, I also defend Israel's right to defend itself. We need to ensure, however, that if there is going to be a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, it must be based on a political negotiation. I do not believe that anything except a two-state solution is a viable long-term solution in that context. The policy of continuing to aggressively expand settlements,

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particularly in the West Bank and in parts of East Jerusalem, is making that two-state solution more remote as a possibility in the context of the negotiations that are needed. I hope Ireland will be able to build a coalition of countries that can intervene in an appropriate way here, first and foremost, to stop the violence.

Foreign Conflicts

49. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the Government response to the report by an organisation (details supplied) that accuses Israel of the crime of apartheid. [24639/21]

Deputy John Brady: Will the Minister respond to the recent report by the Human Rights Watch organisation that accuses Israel of the crime of apartheid? This has been given added significance in light of evolving events in East Jerusalem and Gaza over the past number of days, which amount to war crimes, annexation and apartheid. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am aware of the report referred to in the details supplied, which my officials are reviewing. It is quite a long report, at which my Department's legal team are now looking.

I have been forthright in expressing my concerns regarding the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Ireland's position on this issue is, and will continue to be, based on international law, Israel's obligations as an occupying power under the Fourth Geneva Convention and the relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council, which we have seen over the past number of decades. Ireland has made this position clear at the Security Council, where the issue is discussed each month.

Our approach is rooted in the illegality of Israel's occupation and the right of Palestinians to self-determination. The restrictions that are imposed on Palestinians undermine the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, a right which is at the heart of a proposed two-state solution.

The overall human rights situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory remains a priority concern. Ireland has been active on this issue at the most recent session of the Human Rights Council in March. Ireland also provides financial support to Israeli and Palestinian NGOs working on human rights issues.

Ireland also continues to raise a range of human rights concerns directly with the Israeli authorities and in multilateral fora, including the UN Human Rights Council and at the Security Council. Ireland and the EU will continue to monitor developments on the ground. We remain committed to a two-state solution and will continue to work with partners to revive a political process in line with international law, which ensures equal rights and is acceptable to both parties.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister. I welcome his statements in recent months but unfortunately they are only words. Words are important and significant. That is why I want to ask the Minister about the specific use of words such as "apartheid" and whether he views what is being done in the occupied territories by Israel as apartheid. The Minister said he will

be forthright in terms of international law. International law shows war crimes are being perpetrated by Israel. Does the Minister agree these are war crimes? Does he agree also what is effectively happening in East Jerusalem, forced displacement, is annexation? It has happened before and there has been *de jure* annexations of Golan and Jerusalem which were breaches of international law. Is what is happening on the ground annexation? Could I have a simple “Yes” or “No” reply?

Deputy Simon Coveney: With respect, just because the Deputy says it does not make it so in terms of the-----

Deputy John Brady: I am not the only one who says it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: In terms of-----

Deputy John Brady: Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: If the Deputy would let me answer the question-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Lean ar aghaidh.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Human Rights Watch is a respected NGO. I value the role it and other civil society organisations play. The report by Human Rights Watch is a lengthy and complex document which, as I said earlier, is being reviewed by my Department. I continue to be concerned about the overall human rights situation in Israel and Palestine and discriminatory practices. There is no doubt Israel’s actions have violated Palestinian human rights and equal treatment, and unilateral actions have undermined trust between Israel and the Palestinians.

I am also mindful of the threat posed to the future enjoyment of rights in the context of a future Palestinian state. The programme for Government commits to supporting a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also commits to building a consensus at EU level to take a more proactive approach in supporting a negotiated two-state solution and lasting peace process. While Israeli actions on the ground on settlements are undermining the feasibility of a two-state solution, there is still an opportunity to correct the course. It is critical we put all our efforts into doing so.

Deputy John Brady: The Minister will be aware the International Criminal Court is investigating Israel for war crimes. It is interesting the Minister cannot say that what is happening on the ground - the forced displacement of Palestinian people from the occupied territories – is a war crime. It is a fact; it is not me making it up. That is a fact the Minister cannot dispute. It is worrying he cannot simply state that.

Ending the culture of near total impunity for Israel is allowing it to perpetrate these war crimes and the apartheid system it operates. Words are not forcing Israel to stop and adhere to international law. We need definitive action. The Minister, and we as a country, can lead given our position on the UN Security Council. Ireland and the EU were quick to impose sanctions against Russia for its actions in Crimea. I cannot understand why, after so many decades, we still sit idly by and allow Israel to act with impunity. Why can we not take specific actions in terms of sanctions and calling it what it is, namely, annexation? Words will only go so far. We need action and the Minister needs to step up to the mark and take that action.

Deputy Simon Coveney: With respect, the Deputy’s words only go so far. The way in which we can get something done here is to build consensus so that the EU can collectively-----

Deputy John Brady: People are being slaughtered. What is being done?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Please listen. Much is being done. Ireland is raising its voice internationally but pretending that Ireland on its own can change the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not being realistic. The way for us to really change things on the ground is to work and use our influence within the UN Security Council and the EU, which is exactly what we are doing, rather than putting ourselves out on a limb and taking a position that we cannot build consensus around and, therefore, not actually impacting on the lives of people on the ground, which is ultimately what I am about and what this Government is about. I hope it is what this Parliament is about as well.

That is why tonight we are talking to other like-minded countries on the UN Security Council about trying to build consensus around clear actions and statements at a Security Council level. That is why I raised the issue yesterday at the Foreign Affairs Council meeting. Unfortunately, the situation on the ground has deteriorated significantly since then but this will remain a big priority for the Government and for my Department.

Diplomatic Representation

50. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if private security firms have been appointed to secure Irish embassies and diplomats in unstable regions abroad; if so, the cost of such arrangements; if they provide armed protection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24517/21]

Deputy Cathal Berry: Have private security firms been appointed to secure Irish embassies and diplomats in unstable regions abroad? If so, what is the cost of such arrangements, do they provide armed protection and will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The safety and security of our staff and their families is a fundamental priority of my Department. My Department promotes best practice in managing the security of our people, material assets and premises through workplace security design, review, awareness-raising and training in consultation with the State's security experts.

Ireland has 90 missions abroad, some of which are located in states where there is a moderate to high level of personal security threat. The host state is under a special duty under international law to protect the premises of diplomatic missions. Like other foreign ministries, we supplement those protections with private security services according to our local risk assessments and in accordance with procurement rules. In 2020, my Department invested €1.16 million on security services at our diplomatic missions abroad which operate in such environments.

Staff of my Department may need to travel to locations with high risks to personal security, often in countries where Ireland does not have a permanent mission. Such travel will only be authorised after it has been risk assessed and appropriate mitigations are in place, including armoured and armed protection where necessary. For such travel, security is usually provided by the host state, a hosting mission, the EU delegation or a host international organisation, such as the UN or OSCE. Where the host does not provide close protection, my Department may choose to avail of the services of a vetted local private security provider familiar with the local threat environment on a case-by-case basis.

My Department enjoys a close working relationship with the Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána on security matters. We have called on the assistance of the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána under the emergency civil assistance team initiative for mission security-related projects. We look forward to deepening our relationships in the years ahead as we continue to assure the security of our people.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister for that very useful response. More than €1 million seems like quite a large outlay for such a bespoke service. Has any consideration been given to resourcing and tasking the Defence Forces to provide such a service on a more permanent basis rather than just on an *ad hoc* basis? I ask that for a number of reasons. First, Irish embassies overseas are sovereign Irish territory and many other countries use their militaries, even in Dublin, to secure their embassies. Given we do not have a dedicated diplomatic protection agency and the fact we are looking to increase our diplomatic footprint overseas, what are the Minister's thoughts on that? Would he consider resourcing and tasking the Defence Forces on a more standing arrangement?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces contribute significantly to the security of our people abroad and I am certain this support will continue and potentially even broaden. An Garda Síochána supported seven on-site mission security reviews in 2019 and three in early 2020, two in Africa. Members of the Defence Forces supported two complex projects at three missions over 2019.

I hope we can soon resume the cycle of monitoring to enhance the security of our network. The Defence Forces UN training school at the Curragh provides invaluable personal security training to around 100 members of my Department's staff going on posting each year. It is regarded by many as the high point of what is quite an arduous pre-posting training programme and really gives our diplomats pride in the history and capacity of our Defence Forces.

My Department co-operates under the emergency civil assistance team initiative, which provides support to our missions in consular emergencies and emergency planning as well as in the security of our missions. For operational reasons, I cannot disclose in detail the services and supports provided. Given his background and knowledge around security issues, the Deputy will understand that there will be appropriate occasions when we work with An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces and that there will sometimes be temporary use needed, whether it is for travel or for security or short-term security requirements where it is more appropriate to source local private security firms.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister. Again, that was a very useful response. My point is just to encourage the use of the Defence Forces, these State assets we have, when appropriate. Many of the tasks the Minister listed would be well within the Defence Forces' comfort zone, for instance, armoured protection, bodyguard services, medical support and, crucially, critical communications as well. The Defence Forces have the skill set, tools and talent. If they were resourced and tasked accordingly, they would bring much value to our diplomatic missions overseas.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As I said, they are part of the training programme, part of providing services and advice and assessments at times. Right now, the Department of Foreign Affairs is probably talking to the Department of Defence more than it has ever done, for the obvious reason that the same Minister is over both Departments. Therefore, where appropriate, we of course work together and there are some good examples of how we have done that.

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Recently, when there was an explosion in Beirut Port, the co-operation between the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Defence on delivering practical medical assistance to Beirut quickly, using the infrastructure of the Defence Forces and the diplomatic channels of the Department of Foreign Affairs together, proved to be very effective.

I maintain that not all security requirements across 90 different missions abroad are an appropriate setting for the Defence Forces and defence infrastructure but certainly, when and where appropriate, we will ensure both Departments work closely together.

United Nations

51. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions Ireland will take as co-chair of the UN Security Council Informal Expert Group on Women Peace and Security along with Mexico to maximise the ongoing positive impact that increased local female participation in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali has had to date. [24640/21]

Deputy John Brady: What actions will Ireland take, as co-chair with Mexico of the UN Security Council Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security, to maximise the ongoing positive impact that increased local female participation in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali has had to date?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Ireland has been a long-standing champion of the Women, Peace and Security, WPS, agenda at the UN. It is a key priority for our two-year membership of the Security Council. This agenda recognises the differential impacts of conflict on women, but also their critical agency in conflict prevention and resolution and in peace-building.

Ireland co-chairs the UN Security Council's Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security. In doing so, we are working closely with senior UN leadership on the implementation of WPS on the ground. So far in 2021, Ireland has co-chaired meetings on South Sudan, Yemen, Libya and Mali.

The meeting on Mali took place on 29 April. It was timed to contribute to upcoming discussions on the renewal of the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali known as MINUSMA. It was addressed by the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General of MINUSMA, Joanne Adamson. Representatives of UN Women and the Office of the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict also participated. In advance of the meeting, Irish representatives met with Malian women from civil society to ensure their views were taken forward into the informal expert group.

Women's participation in the Malian peace process, and the issues of gender and WPS, are priority actions in the MINUSMA mandate. The mission plays a vital role in building political will on the part of the Malian authorities to promote women's participation in peace and security matters, and supporting locally-led processes.

At the UN Security Council briefings and consultations on Mali and MINUSMA, Ireland has highlighted the key role of MINUSMA in advancing the women, peace and security in Mali. In particular we have focused on supporting women's full, equal and meaningful participation in the implementation of the Mali Peace Agreement.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister. I am aware we have troops stationed in Mali and it probably has one of the highest casualty rates of all UN missions. Since the start of the stabilisation mission in Mali, the participation of women within the process has grown from 3% to 31% and it must be said that is a massive increase. There is a critical mass theory across all disciplines that once a grouping reaches a critical mass of 35% we can begin to see tangible culture change. The chief of staff of the Mali mission, Claudia Banz, argues that while there are more women than ever before, their number remains insufficient. She states they are contributing in a significant manner in military, civil and leadership positions and their presence has had a positive impact on news, basic issues, sanitation, food safety, etc. However, there are real, serious challenges. That 31% needs to be increased because of the positive benefits women's participation in the process is having. The Minister might touch on how we are going to increase those numbers.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Ireland has been to the fore on the women, peace and security agenda for many years. There are other countries that are very much with us on that agenda within the UN. We very much want to build that into the mandate for peacekeeping missions as well. Our own experience on this island is that if we have gender balance in the context of both politics and peace negotiations, we are likely to get better outcomes. That is certainly the case in a place like Mali also. We are actually involved in two different missions in Mali. One is the MINUSMA UN mission, where a number of soldiers from our Army Ranger Wing and some others from the Defence Forces are working with a German contingent and doing a really fantastic job there. The other is an EU training mission we are involved in, where we are working with other European states to help to train and prepare the Malian forces to try to deal with local security concerns. At every point we are constantly reminding both the UN and others of the need to ensure there is a genuine effort around ensuring female participation at all levels in the peace process in Mali.

Deputy John Brady: The Minister is right, female participation has certainly helped and changed the whole dynamic of the peace process in Mali and has helped frame the content of the peace talks. Unfortunately, Covid has had a huge impact in Mali, as it has in many countries, in particular in developing ones. It has been said Covid-19 has had the same impact on countries such as Mali as conflict is having. Unfortunately, many women who were participating in the peace process have now pulled away from it to go back to their caring roles in their families and communities. That is going to have a huge impact, not just on the peace process but also on the participation of women in those leading roles as well. That is going to create a huge challenge so I am interested in hearing how that particular issue is going to be addressed. It has the potential to set back the entire peace process, unfortunately, and the major progress that has been made, particularly through female participation.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is true to say that in many countries the Covid-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women and their role in society. It has also had a disproportionate impact on girls' education as many schools have closed and the priority in some cases has been to educate boys rather than boys and girls. That is why we are putting an enormous amount of public money from the Irish Aid budget into the education of girls over the next number of years. It is close to €250 million.

As I mentioned earlier, we are seeing in Tigray the impact of conflict on women and girls, particularly when sexual violence is used as part of that conflict, as it increasingly is. That has always been a part of war and conflict but there is certainly much evidence that it is being used now. When there is a peace process that is trying to put things back together after a conflict,

women must be part of the healing process.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

EU Meetings

52. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 10 May 2021. [24134/21]

Deputy John Lahart: This question concerns the European Council meeting but I have two questions and I am quite prepared to cede the rest of my time to the Minister if he wishes to develop the theme. The Minister mentioned that he called in the Israeli ambassador today and outlined what he said to him. Will the Minister give us some flavour of the ambassador's response?

I understand the Minister had some online dialogue with a former US Senator, Mr. John Kerry, about climate action. Will the Minister inform the House of the fruits of that discussion or what came up?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Israeli ambassador is able to speak for himself and he will come before the foreign affairs committee tomorrow, potentially to give the Israeli perspective. He will do as the Deputy might expect, which is to give an Israeli perspective on security and the reason the Israeli Government felt it had to respond the way it has to protect its population against rocket fire from Gaza and so on. That is part of the story that we cannot ignore, of course. There is a broader story as well in terms of what has driven the tension that has resulted in this cycle of violence and how we respond to that. That is in addition to trying to create a ceasefire as well.

Influential and connected countries are trying to work on a ceasefire and people involved with the Middle East peace process know who they are. They include Egypt, Qatar and others, and the efforts have been unsuccessful so far. I fear we will see an escalation before we see an end to this cycle of violence. I hope I am wrong but I suspect we may well see many more innocent civilians and children dying as a result of this latest cycle of violence, which is the worst we have seen in a number of years.

I am glad to say the conversation with Mr. Kerry was a much more positive discussion. The exchange with the presidential special envoy, Mr. Kerry, focused on preparations for COP26 and measures that must be taken to ensure success, including bringing along least-developed countries and small island developing states.

My contribution on behalf of Ireland was to focus on the practical co-operation required between the EU and the US in a number of areas. These include climate finance, as we must spend more money and commit more financial resources to climate finance, particularly around adaptation for developing countries, small island developing states and countries that desperately need to invest in infrastructure to adapt to the new realities they are facing on the basis of climate change that is already happening. That is as well as planning for further change in

future, whether it arises from desertification, more violent storms in places like the Caribbean or flood risk to small island states in the south Pacific.

Mr. Kerry agreed on much of that. The other area on which I would like to do more work concerns the oceans. We cannot have a credible global climate action agenda without a very serious discussion around oceans from a mitigation and adaptation perspective. The area on which we focused most in terms of transatlantic co-operation, and where we got a very good response from Mr. Kerry, was funding for climate adaptation and resilience. There is much focus on mitigation and potentially not enough focus on adaptation and resilience. There is also the question of oceans, in which I am very interested and something in which Ireland can become a global leader through the combination of good policy decisions and research.

We should not forget that the programme for Government means Ireland is one of the few countries in the world committed to designating 30% of our ocean territory to marine protected areas at different levels. We must develop that policy in the context of COP26.

Deputy John Lahart: The conversation seemed to reflect a complete change in attitude, tone and temperature from the United States on the Paris accords and climate action in general.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Lahart. We are finished with that question as the Deputy conceded his time.

Deputy John Lahart: Four minutes are allocated for the interaction and we have only had three of those.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have just come in.

Deputy John Lahart: I know but I was following the clock.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Do I make two contributions?

Deputy John Lahart: I ceded all my time to the Minister but he only took three minutes when he should have four minutes.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will make a quick reply with the indulgence of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. The Minister can take a minute.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is like chalk and cheese. Essentially, we have gone from an American Administration in Washington DC that really denied there was a climate emergency at all to one that wants to be a global leader with the ambition around the required response to deliver the targets of 2030 and 2050, which are dramatic.

The truth is that if the US and EU combined are not effectively a force for change, this cannot and will not happen. This is not the first time Mr. Kerry has reached out to the Foreign Affairs Council and it is the second time we have had a nearly two-hour discussion with him on the level of ambition that comes with both the US and EU working together trying to deliver global action.

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Tourism Industry

53. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the return of North American international travel (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24018/21]

Deputy James O'Connor: Will the Minister give a report to the House on the status of international travel between the United States or North America as a whole and the Republic of Ireland? The Minister appreciates there is much confusion both in the media and among the public, especially those working in tourism and aviation, arising from the Tánaiste's comments as reported by Mr. Philip Ryan in the *Irish Independent* on the status of US-Ireland travel. When will this return and when will travel return for other countries in North America?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not believe there is any confusion. There is no clear decision from the Government yet on moving away from our current approach to international travel, which is very restrictive. There is hope, of course, that as we move through summer that position will change as more people are vaccinated and society becomes more protected with the shield of vaccination. Other countries across the European Union will create a level of protection, along with the United States, and there is hope that the public health risks linked to international travel - specifically importing or reseeding Covid-19 and new variants - will lessen. The hope is that will happen as protection for our citizens increases and the protection for those likely to travel increases as well.

The Government has not agreed a timeline or dates around a change to international travel policy.

I hope that by the end of this month the Government will have had an opportunity to consider this seriously and to give a line of sight on the timelines that people can plan and prepare for. We know the European Commission will have a new green passport system ready for June but that is a system that is primarily designed for the EU. Whether or not a similar system gets extended to facilitate transatlantic travel is something the European Commission has hinted at but it has not delivered any papers on it to date that I am aware of.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for that information. I have come here with my own research and having spoken to many people working within aviation and tourism. I regret to inform the Minister that there is much confusion. I ask that as Minister for Foreign Affairs, because this is critical to his role in his Department, the Minister would engage on a Government level as soon as possible with people working in aviation and tourism on how the digital green certificate will be implemented and on how such a system could potentially work with US travel. There was much concern about the Tánaiste's comments today that there may not be the potential for US travel to return in full until next year, which came as news to many people working within tourism and in aviation. That is why I wanted to highlight that particular point. I accept that this has to be taken with the benefit of public health advice but there is a dire need for clarification on this and I am happy to hear that the Minister will be reporting back to the House and that there will be discussions on this during May. I want to stress the point on stakeholder engagement again. I ask the Minister to comment on that very important matter.

9 o'clock

Deputy Simon Coveney: I take the point that there is much concern in the travel industry generally and in the tourism sector around wanting to understand, plan for and prepare for time-

lines around facilitating international travel again. As of yet, the Government has not given a clear timeline around that issue. The Tánaiste said today that he hopes to see travel between Britain and Ireland facilitated to become much freer over the summer months. I hope that is the case. We have a valuable common travel area which we carefully protected through the Brexit process but we are still guided by public health advice on the travel restrictions that are in place. For the EU more generally, the green passport system will be in place in June but it is a policy decision for the State to then decide how and when to implement it here. That system gives a database for us to make policy decisions on the back of.

Deputy James O'Connor: From my understanding, much of the reporting has been that many of the negotiations on US-EU travel were with the Schengen area and Ireland is not part of that because of the common travel area. Perhaps the Minister could enlighten me and the people who are listening as to whether Ireland will move in lockstep with the Schengen area if there is to be a full reopening of US travel. This is in the context of the fact that there are more than 160,000 people, which is an incredible number, employed by US foreign direct investment in our country. Even in our shared county of Cork we can clearly see that level of investment, whether it is in places such as Carrigtwohill, Little Island or in the Minister's constituency in Ringaskiddy or in Apple in Cork North-Central. There are tens of thousands of people in our county working in US companies. Not only is it important from a leisure point of view to have US visitors coming to Ireland and spending money in our local economy but there is also the foreign direct investment aspect to this. It is deeply damaging to our economy and to aviation in Ireland, which is critical to the economic recovery in the post-Covid era.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Minister is right that there is a legal and a public health dimension to this but there is also a purely practical dimension to it. The reality is that we will be opening up travel with the United Kingdom and there are transatlantic planes, which used to service Shannon Airport, that are now flying from Manchester to North America. The Minister is acutely aware of this, having an airport in his constituency. Once we have an open and common travel area with the United Kingdom, it is simply senseless if planes are taking off from North America and coming into the United Kingdom for us to not allow planes to go from Ireland to North America. People will simply travel via the United Kingdom and via Belfast if necessary. All we are doing is strangling our economy to no public health benefit if people are travelling anyway, which they will do sooner rather than later. I urge the Minister to keep the practicalities in mind as well as the public health concerns because sometimes some of the public health advice seems to be completely devoid of practical effect. It is not always so but sometimes it is, including the example of the advice on antigen testing, given the European Union position on it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I can understand the frustration, particularly for those who have airports in their constituencies, but for everybody. It was not too long ago when many Members were calling on us to put anyone who was coming from anywhere into mandatory hotel quarantine. I am not saying the Deputy was saying that but many Members were saying that. We are trying to get the balance right in managing risk and taking the advice from our public health teams and then making decisions with as much pragmatism as we can have in those decisions. We have one of the most conservative and restrictive international transport policies of any country in Europe. I would defend that and if one looks at the impact of that in the non-importation of variants of concern in recent months, that policy is working. The dynamics around that decision are changing, however, because of the impact of vaccines, both at home and abroad. As that risk changes, the policy will change too and I hope we can do that as soon

as we safely can from a public health perspective.

International Relations

54. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the initiatives that Ireland is pursuing unilaterally at European Union level and through Ireland's membership of the UN Security Council to protect the interests of the Uighur Muslim population; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23991/21]

112. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has raised the issue of correction camps for the Uighur minority in China with the Chinese authorities; if it is proposed to take a common EU position on the matter; the use that has been made of Ireland's current position within the UN systems to raise the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24204/21]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is Deputy Stanton taking this question?

Deputy David Stanton: Tá sé sin ceart. Deputy Creed has asked me to take this question on his behalf and he sends his apologies for not being able to be here this evening.

Deputy Creed was interested in what initiatives Ireland is pursuing unilaterally, at European Union level and through Ireland's membership of the UN Security Council to protect the interests of the Uighur Muslim population. I ask the Minister to make a statement on that matter.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I propose to take Questions Nos. 54 and 112 together.

Ireland, along with our EU partners, remains deeply concerned about the treatment of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in the province of Xinjiang. We are closely following the situation, including on reports of systemic abuse, torture, arbitrary detention, forced labour, forced sterilisations and restrictions on freedom of religion and belief.

In response to the situation and under the EU global human rights sanctions regime, the EU adopted sanctions on 22 March 2021 against one entity and four individuals in China due to their involvement in human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The EU global human rights sanctions regime allows the EU to target serious human rights violations and abuses by state and non-state actors worldwide. It enables the EU to respond rapidly and in a more tangible and direct way to human rights, one of the fundamental values of EU foreign policy.

Ireland and the EU raise our concerns with Chinese authorities in both bilateral and multilateral contexts. Over the course of 2020, the EU raised its concerns regarding the human rights situation in China with Chinese authorities during its high-level engagements at the EU-China summit and the EU-China leaders' meeting. More recently, Ireland raised concerns regarding the situation in Xinjiang in our national statement at the UN Human Rights Council in March this year. Prior to this, we also reiterated our concerns in our national statement at the UN Human Rights Council in September last year, which urged China to allow unrestricted access to the region for the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Ireland has also supported a number of joint initiatives in the UN system. We joined a statement at the UN third committee on 6 October 2020 that reiterates our grave concern regarding the situation in Xinjiang, and recalls the exceptional letter of concern issued by 50 UN special procedures mandate holders. This letter called on China to respect human rights and to allow immediate, meaningful and unfettered

access to Xinjiang for independent observers.

Ireland's approach on the UN Security Council is informed by our record as a country with a consistent, principled and independent foreign policy. We put forward our perspectives on all issues on the UN Security Council agenda, and engage with and listen carefully to the views of all UN Security Council members, including China. Although the treatment of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang is not on the UN Security Council agenda, the Government will continue to monitor and assess the situation and engage with the Chinese authorities bilaterally and in multilateral fora, as we have been doing to date.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he agree with the US view that this is genocide? Does he further agree that the reports from the region are absolutely shocking, appalling and deplorable? Has unrestricted access been granted to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights? Is there any sign of this happening? What further action can the State take in this regard?

Deputy Michael McNamara: I would also like to know whether the Minister would use the word "genocide" to describe what is happening in Xinjiang province. If not, would he at least use the phrase "cultural genocide"? This is what it appears to be. It is designed to wipe the Uighur culture off the face of the planet, or at least of the face of Chinese territory and thereby off the face of the planet. Has the Minister raised this bilaterally with the Chinese mission to the UN or with the Chinese representation in Ireland?

Deputy Simon Coveney: This has come up in engagements with the Chinese ambassador here. Obviously we have raised this, and I outlined a series of instances where we have raised it, in international fora, whether at the UN Human Rights Council or other fora.

The term "genocide" has a particular meaning in international law, and recognition of events defined as genocide involves an analysis of facts and law. Ireland follows the practice of recognising genocide where this has been established by a judgment of an international court where there is international consensus on the matter. Some parliaments have passed non-binding motions labelling the situation in Xinjiang as genocide. In my opinion, such resolutions have mainly served to harden attitudes on the Chinese side but have not improved the situation for the Uighur population. An approach whereby the EU, its member states and other like-minded states continue to press for better access to the region and to better establish the realities on the ground seems to me to be a more effective one to follow at this time.

Deputy David Stanton: Will the Minister respond on the comment about unrestricted access of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights? Is this likely to happen? Is there any reason it should not happen? If the Chinese say there is nothing to hide why not let the high commissioner visit and inspect the region, as happened in Wuhan and other cities where Covid-19 erupted.

Deputy Michael McNamara: If the Minister will not use the word "genocide" will he use the term "cultural genocide"? He spoke about the judgment of a court but that always follows many years after a genocide and consensus is developed years after the event. We can see what is happening before our eyes. There is considerable evidence from reputable media and other governments that have more advanced capabilities to monitor what is happening in China. We do know what is happening.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We know some of what is happening, and I have been very criti-

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cal of it, as has the Dáil and Seanad. A very strong motion was tabled by Senator McDowell and others, which was supported by all parties, a number of months ago. Ireland has not been quiet on this issue. We have raised it. With regard to the issue of how we define it legally, certainly the advice I have from the Department is that we do not have sufficient legal certainty to be able to categorise it as genocide. I am not going to use emotive language for the sake of it. To call something genocide is a very serious accusation and we need to be able to back it up in terms of the legal consequences of the term. That is all I am saying.

To respond to what Deputy Stanton raised, my understanding is that access has not been granted. The EU has been raising the temperature on this issue. This is why it has applied targeted sanctions through the human rights system of sanctions now available to the EU. There were retaliatory sanctions, by the way, from China immediately once they were announced. A number of Members of the European Parliament are on the sanctions list. The decision to apply sanctions stung. There is no doubt this issue is a cause of tension between the EU and China. The challenge is for us to have a good relationship with China and, at the same time, to be able to raise real concerns when we have them in a way that is appropriate and in a way that is listened to and lands. Getting that balance right is an ongoing debate within the EU on China.

Humanitarian Access

55. Deputy David Stanton asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the work of his Department to ensure that the remaining international crossing between Turkey and Syria stays open, given that more than 2.7 million people are reliant on assistance arriving via this crossing with regard to the humanitarian crisis in Syria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24021/21]

Deputy David Stanton: This question concerns what I understand is the one remaining international crossing between Turkey and Syria and ensuring that it stays open given the fact that 2.7 million people are reliant on assistance arriving via this crossing, with regard to the humanitarian crisis in Syria. I understand that people are now returning from Turkey to Syria because of the clampdowns and restrictions in Turkey. I ask the Minister to comment on this and on the UN resolution that governs this particular issue.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As the civil war in Syria enters its 11th year, humanitarian needs remain extremely high. Across Syria, 13.4 million people need humanitarian assistance, including almost 3 million people in the north-west of the country, which is the population served by this crossing.

On the Security Council, Ireland acts with Norway as co-penholder on the Syrian humanitarian file. In this role, we have strongly advocated for humanitarian aid to be able to reach all of the people who need it. We are undertaking extensive engagement with all relevant parties, including Council members, countries in the region, the UN system and civil society.

Since 2014, the UN Security Council has recognised through successive resolutions the importance of ensuring humanitarian access in Syria including, where necessary, across borders through UN mandated crossings. In July 2020, the council extended the mandate for the UN to use the border crossing at Bab al-Hawa, between Turkey and north-west Syria, for the delivery of humanitarian aid for a period of 12 months. I visited Bab al-Hawa in January, and saw first-hand the scale of the operation, as well as the professionalism and transparency of the opera-

tion. Humanitarian need in the north west is even greater now than when the existing mandate was agreed last summer. The spread of Covid-19, and a deteriorating economic situation, have further exacerbated the humanitarian situation.

As we move towards the date of expiry of the current mandate on 10 July, it is clear that it would not be possible to meet the extensive humanitarian needs in Syria without the renewal of the cross-border resolution. This includes the border crossing in the north-west. The resolution should be renewed for as long as is necessary to meet the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people. It is not easy to get agreement on keeping that crossing open and we are doing everything we can to try to make sure that we get a successful outcome in a few weeks.

Deputy David Stanton: The Minister is to be commended on visiting and seeing for himself what is happening out there. Will he give us an account of what he saw, what his concerns are and how he sees this developing? This has been going on for quite a number of years, as he outlined. Millions of people stranded in no man's land depend on 1,000 lorries of food a month going in to feed them and look after them. What is the future? Will the Minister give us an idea of this? It is not a very safe area. Perhaps he will give us an outline of what he saw and what are his ideas for the future.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The reason this is so complicated is that north-west area is essentially Idlib province. The strategy within Syria in terms of the conflict there has essentially been to push the resistance and opposition to the regime in Syria into the north-west. Some of those who support the Assad regime see aid flowing in a structured way from Turkey into north-west Syria essentially as feeding the resistance and prolonging the war and so the politics and the military decisions around aid. Some of them would also accuse that crossing of facilitating weapons as well as aid. I have to say from what I saw there - we were fairly robust in our conversations with the UN agencies that were there - that there is a very transparent process of ensuring that what should be crossing into Idlib for humanitarian reasons is what is crossing in. The focus now has to be to try to manage the politics of this in the context of the politics of Syria on the UN Security Council, which is about as divisive as it gets, to try to find a way of ensuring this crossing stays open. I believe it can be done but it will not be easy.

Deputy David Stanton: My final question is about the UN resolution which expires on 10 July 2021, which is not far away now. Can the Minister give us an understanding of whether this resolution will be extended and whether there is agreement that it should be extended?

Deputy Simon Coveney: At present, there is not agreement that it will be extended. We are working on that and speaking to the key actors. Clearly, Russia is an absolutely key actor here, as is Turkey, as is Iran. Of course, some of these countries are not on the Security Council but are influential over countries that are.

The reason I am so exercised about this is that if one speaks to the NGOs that are providing daily humanitarian assistance, in some cases into tented villages or makeshift homes, one will learn that they are desperate to keep this supply chain open. The alternative to having a UN-monitored, UN-managed and transparent crossing where huge volumes of humanitarian assistance can be brought to close to 3 million people is to have unaccountable border crossings where sporadic aid will get in, but with such levels of aid certainly not being anything like sufficient to deal with the numbers who need it. In such circumstances, one will see mass movement of people - some of them coming across the border into Turkey - and all the tensions that will cause. From a humanitarian point of view, we will be appealing to all of the countries

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that are involved in this process to find a way of agreeing a resolution that can allow this aid to continue to flow.

Historical Conflicts

56. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Government will formally recognise that genocide was committed against the people of Armenia during World War 1 by the Ottoman Turkish Government. [24131/21]

105. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on whether the events that befell Armenia and the Armenian people in 1915 merit the description of genocide; his views on the statement issued by the President of the United States on 24 April 2021 in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23940/21]

Deputy John Brady: Will the Minister follow the lead that was taken by the US President, Joe Biden, on 24 April 2021 to formally recognise that genocide was committed against the people of Armenia during the First World War by the Ottoman Turkish Government?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Government views the terrible events which saw the deaths of a large number of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire as a tragedy. We have previously expressed deepest sympathy for the enormous suffering of the Armenian people during this period and I do so again here this evening. The Government has not taken a stance on whether those terrible events should be described as a genocide because we believe we are not in a position to adjudicate on this matter. To reach a conclusion that any events amount to genocide involves the consideration and determination of a number of complex legal issues, and an assessment of the actions and intentions of many parties. Ireland is not in a position to do this with regard to these events.

As I said in one of my previous answers, Ireland follows the practice of recognising genocide only where this has been established by a judgment of an appropriate international court, or where there is international consensus on the matter. There is no such consensus on this issue. I am aware of the positions of other countries on the matter, including the recent statement released by the United States. However, neither the EU nor the UN has adopted a position on this question and there is no international consensus on whether these events amount to genocide. I wish to be clear that our position on the description of these events does not diminish our recognition of the terrible and shocking nature of what occurred to the Armenian people between 1915 and 1917. We continue to carefully monitor developments on this issue and will keep our position under regular review.

Deputy John Brady: The massacre of over 1.5 million Armenians certainly was an act of genocide and the campaign of genocidal massacre that was inflicted on the people of Armenia was a crime against humanity also.

I hear that the Minister is saying we are not in a position to adjudicate on the matter. However, I have made reference to the US. I will make reference to numerous other countries that have taken a stand also. It least another 30 nations have described it as genocide, including 16 EU members. I note the Vatican has also taken a strong position on it. The fact is the State was not in existence in 1915. There are not too many lawmakers that were in existence in 1915 either. We should take the lead from other countries that have formed a position on it using the

information they have to hand and make a formal declaration as well.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: It is important to point out that the massacre of the Armenians in 1915 and 1916 is not only a matter of historical interest. It also is, notwithstanding its antiquity, an issue that requires a political response. That is why, I suppose, I put down this question. We recently saw a political response from the new President of the United States who, on 24 April, which is the date upon which Armenians mark the commencement of the genocide, issued a statement on behalf of the United States indicating that they recognise it as genocide.

I note what the Minister stated but I have to ask how we can ever recognise this as being genocide if we are dependent upon awaiting the outcome of an international court decision or international consensus. There will not be any international court decision in respect of this. Notwithstanding that, there are significant commentaries from journalists and contemporary observers of the genocide who have written tracts on the evidence of it. That needs to be taken into account by the Government.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We regularly review this issue. It might be helpful to outline why it is a difficult question to answer. In December 1948, the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide described genocide as carrying out acts intended “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”. The dispute about whether these events were genocide centres on the question of premeditation - on the degree to which the killings were orchestrated. Some histories believe that in this case they were but there are many who offer the other argument also. The 1948 UN Convention sets out a clear definition of genocide and the legal process to be followed if disputes arise. There has been no ruling in regard to this matter by an international court and neither the EU nor the UN has recognised these events as genocide. In the absence of such a ruling, the Government does not feel Ireland is in a position to determine whether these events were genocide.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister. I hear what he is saying. Six million Jews perished at the hands of the Nazis in the Second World War and the latter half of the 20th century witnessed further genocidal campaigns in places such as Cambodia, East Timor, Bosnia and Rwanda. It is important that we learn from the past to ensure that genocide is called out as it is and that we try to ensure that acts of genocide will not happen in the future. I call on the Minister to look at the issue again, follow the lead of America and 30 other nations that have done the same, including 16 European nations, do the right thing and take the lead. We have a position on the UN Security Council and it would be a poignant important step to take to recognise it as it is.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: When President Biden was making his statement on 24 April, he said the reason American policy had changed was not for the purpose of trying to cast blame but in order to ensure this would not happen again. We need to recognise that regrettably, there will be efforts at genocide again in this century as there were in the last century. The purpose here is not to try to hold any country to account. In fairness, there is no country today that represents the Ottoman Empire of the past and nobody is suggesting that a country should be held liable. However, if acts of genocide happened in the previous century, no matter how far back, it is important that we as a State face up to our responsibility to assess it and figure out whether it was genocide. We should look at it again. If we are going to just leave it there and say that we will not come back to it until there is a ruling by an international court, we are not going to face up to the fact that this is an injustice that needs to be responded to, notwithstanding its antiquity.

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Deputy Michael McNamara: I would make the point that we call out international crime for what it is for the same reason we call out domestic crime for what it is. It is not just to punish or as an act of retribution but also to deter its recurrence. We should recall that in the week before Poland was invaded in 1939, the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler said “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” These things recur until they are dealt with, which buttresses the points made by the previous speakers. It is also relevant to what is happening in China, of course.

Deputy Simon Coveney: My Department examines this question on a regular basis. What we see from the available data is that there continues to be no consensus and little clarity on this. The tragedy of the Armenian people was recognised as genocide by parliaments of over 20 countries, including 16 EU member state legislatures and by the European Parliament but recognition at the level of government amounts to a much smaller number. As I mentioned in my reply, the Department’s briefing notes on this are simply about trying to be consistent. When we are assessing something as serious as genocide at an international level, we have to apply a methodology in terms of how we make that assessment. That methodology at the moment is based on Ireland following a practice of recognising genocide only where it has been established by a judgment of an international court or where there is international consensus on the matter. That said, I take on board what members have said.

Question No. 57 replied to with Written Answers.

Northern Ireland

58. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the outcome of discussions he had with members of the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government on the need to implement the Stormont House and the Fresh Start agreements in full. [1573/21]

73. **Deputy Peadar Kirby** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of the implementation of the legacy provisions of the Stormont House Agreement. [39931/20]

Deputy Brendan Smith: The Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements need to be implemented to deal with legacy issues. I welcome the coroner’s report today on the Ballymurphy massacre. A sense of relief was so evident as I listened this evening to the families of those innocent people who were murdered by state forces. The anguish and suffering those families were put through as a result of the heinous crimes committed by the British army was horrific. Unfortunately there are many other families still grieving the loss of a loved one who have not gotten the truth and in some instances, they have been subjected to appalling lies and smears. Legacy issues must be dealt with.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I propose to take Questions Nos. 58 and 73 together.

The position of the Government with respect to the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland has been clear and consistent for a number of years now. The Stormont House Agreement framework was reached collectively by both Governments and the political parties after intensive negotiations. To be completely accurate, the UUP did not support it but the other parties did. It is vital that we make progress on this for the victims and families who have been waiting for so long and for society as a whole, as we seek to build deeper reconciliation. The Government has continued to engage on this issue since the Stormont House Agreement was reached

in 2014 and to work for that important progress. We want to see the agreement implemented.

In March of last year, the UK Government issued a written ministerial statement that proposed to significantly depart from the Stormont House Agreement. Since then, I have spoken regularly with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to express our strong concerns and to reiterate the importance of a collective approach consistent with the Stormont House Agreement, and one which is compliant with international human rights obligations. I reaffirmed those critical principles to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when we met last week in Dublin and strongly advised him against any unilateral action on these very sensitive issues.

Media reports last week of possible plans to introduce a statute of limitations have caused significant upset, shock and concern in Northern Ireland. In my time as Minister for Foreign Affairs, I have met with many victims and survivors from both communities. I know how hurt they are at the idea of being denied a route to pursue justice on behalf of their loved ones.

As per the Stormont House Agreement framework, there is a need to take a comprehensive view of how to achieve progress and reconciliation for society as a whole but the needs of victims and families must be at the heart of the process.

I join Deputy Smith in welcoming the report released today on the Ballymurphy massacre. I have had the privilege of meeting the families who have been involved in decades of campaigning for justice. Today's ruling was hugely significant and important, making it absolutely clear that none of the ten people killed over that three-day period nearly 50 years ago was guilty of anything. They should not have been killed in the way they were.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his response. I remember meeting the Ballymurphy families in the Dáil in 2014. If memory serves me, a motion was passed unanimously in the House in 2015 in support of the families. I very much welcome and do not doubt the Government's commitment to dealing with legacy issues but the British Government must be equally committed, which has not been the case so far, unfortunately. The Minister used the phrases "strong concern" and "critical principles" and referred to the unacceptability of unilateral action by the British Government. I am glad that the Minister has reiterated those comments in the House this evening; it is extremely important. I mentioned that there was an agreed motion on the Ballymurphy massacre and he will recall that there were also agreed motions on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings in 2008, 2011 and 2016. In those motions we called on the British Government to give an independent legal expert access to papers relevant to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. Sadly, the British Government has not responded to the request of a sovereign parliament. We must pursue that vigorously again because we will soon reach the 47th anniversary of those terrible atrocities.

Deputy Simon Coveney: On Ballymurphy, the significance of the report that was released today should not be underestimated. This happened over a three-day period almost five decades ago. The families involved are representative of many families across Northern Ireland from different backgrounds and communities who have been tortured for decades because they have not been believed, understood or listened to and they have not managed to establish the truth. In order for reconciliation to be as powerful as it needs to be in the context of Northern Ireland and its future, we must ensure that we have a structured system that can establish the truth where possible and pursue justice, where possible. Many victims' families recognise that the pursuit of justice in a court may not be possible in many cases but they certainly want that opportunity. That is what the Stormont House Agreement delivers and we will continue to support that.

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Deputy Brendan Smith: I agree with the Minister. I know families who have lost loved ones and who have never gotten justice. They have never gotten the truth regarding who carried out the atrocities. In December 1972 in my own home area of Belturbet, County Cavan, two young teenagers, Geraldine O'Reilly and Patrick Stanley, were killed by a bomb. RTÉ will broadcast a programme tonight about the bombing of Belturbet. Last year I brought information to this House that had been passed to me by senior academics from the University of Nottingham. Their research showed clearly that there was collusion with state forces in Northern Ireland regarding the transport of that bomb from County Fermanagh into County Cavan on that tragic night. The Minister for Justice is pursuing that matter with the northern authorities at my request. In every opportunity the Minister has to meet with members of the British Government, and when working with members of the Northern Ireland Executive, it is absolutely important that it is emphasised that we must get the truth. These families have said to me that they are getting older and that they need to get the truth as soon as possible.

Deputy Simon Coveney: For legacy to work, the approach must be built on consensus. That is the real challenge here for politicians to deliver. We must work closely with the British Government and work with all parties in Northern Ireland, so that we can bring all the communities in Northern Ireland with us. If we are going to establish the truth, people will have to come forward and speak about things which they may not have spoken about for decades. We will have to ensure PSNI files are made available. We will have to do our part on this side of the Border also. We have passed legislation to allow members of An Garda Síochána to contribute to inquests in Northern Ireland, which is legally a different jurisdiction.

Both Governments must work together to deliver a structure that can manage the legacy of the past in a way that contributes positively to reconciliation in the future. That is why I have been so direct in saying that neither Government should take unilateral action. We must work through this together. Most importantly, we must bring along political parties in Northern Ireland and victims' groups and their families have to be at the heart of everything we do, first and foremost. No other issues should be prioritised over those objectives.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Human Rights

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise this important issue, coming as it does after the debate we have just had during Question Time. It is very appropriate and I thank the Minister for being in the House to reply.

Over the past year, in particular, when the global community has been preoccupied with the fight against Covid-19, it is quite understandable that issues of a human-rights nature and atrocities, which take place under various headings throughout the globe, have to some extent gone unnoticed. They were certainly not noticed to the extent they would otherwise have been. It is important that Ireland uses its position as a member of the UN Security Council to high-

light locations throughout the globe where these atrocities are taking place. They take place on a daily and hourly basis, and even as we speak, they continue. Reference was made during Question Time to the situations in Sudan, Ethiopia and throughout Africa and to the atrocities various organisations visit on helpless, poor and humble communities regularly.

Atrocities against women were referred to during the previous debate and I want to emphasise that point again. These atrocities continue with greater ferocity and rapidity, and the number of incidents increases daily. Rape and sexual abuse seem to be more commonplace than they ever were. The Minister acknowledged rape has always happened during the course of a war, much to our chagrin. I hope this is being taken into account and that decisions will be made in the UN which will overhaul the activities of the perpetrators in these situations.

I have only a short amount of time to refer to the ongoing difficulties in China, which were mentioned by other Members during Question Time, in Myanmar, which continue, and in other locations throughout the globe. These atrocities seem to continue with impunity because there is a belief among the perpetrators that there will be no response, and that there can be no response. They seek the use of the time available to them to do so under cover of other tragedies.

I ask the Minister, even if it means standing out and being different from everybody else, that we use the position we now have on the UN Security Council to highlight these atrocities, to bring public and international attention to them, and to make it clear that there is a way of punishing these people and that punishment will be meted out. By doing so, nobody will presume that they can pursue such atrocities with impunity. The International Criminal Court and the war crimes tribunals were referenced in the previous debate. It is imperative that this is done as a matter of urgency so as to give ample warning to the perpetrators of the kinds of atrocities spoken about over the last hour and a half in this House. They will continue unless something really dramatic is done, that is, to let it be known that there will be retribution and that it will be swift and severe. This has happened in the past, for example, in regard to Sierra Leone and the perpetrators there.

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank Deputy Durkan for raising this important issue this evening. Today marks the tenth anniversary of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, sometimes known as the Istanbul Convention. It is a timely reminder of the impact of Covid-19, particularly regarding the increasing incidences of domestic violence against women during the pandemic. As Deputy Durkan is aware, women are to the fore in providing healthcare and support for those affected by the pandemic. Furthermore, in many countries, the economic downturn and closure of schools means that many girls are not returning to education, which undermines decades of progress in human rights and sustainable development goals. I am also very conscious that access to human-rights monitors, from the UN to civil society organisations, are severely curtailed because of the travel and other restrictions during the pandemic.

Ireland has been very active in promoting and protecting human rights at the United Nations through our current membership of the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council in Geneva and the Third Committee of the General Assembly. Deputy Durkan will be aware that Ireland took up its seat on the UN Security Council on 1 January. Since then, we have been working across the full council agenda, which includes some 30 country and 20 thematic files. Promoting respect for human rights, accountability, and compliance with international law is central to our efforts.

In recent months, for example, we addressed the issues in Myanmar and Ethiopia. Myanmar has been a focus of the UN Security Council since the coup in February. During discussions at the council, Ireland has highlighted concerns for the protection of human rights, the humanitarian situation and the rule of law, in line with our values. We are also active at the Human Rights Council and support the work of the UN Secretary General and his special envoy on Myanmar.

On Ethiopia, Ireland has been very proactive in encouraging the council to focus on this crisis. We initiated council discussions on the deeply concerning humanitarian situation in Tigray in February and March. We led negotiations on a press statement on Ethiopia, which was adopted by the council on 22 April. This was the first time the council spoke publicly on the situation there. The statement called for unfettered humanitarian access in Tigray and expressed deep concern about human rights violations and, in particular, sexual violence against women and girls. We have raised concerns about human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in a wide range of other contexts. We will continue to do so throughout the term on the council.

More broadly across the UN system, Ireland is a strong supporter of the work of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, who I have met on a number of occasions - in February and in March - at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. We delivered more than 20 statements on thematic and country-specific human rights situations including Myanmar, Syria, Iran, Yemen, South Sudan, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Eritrea, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territory. As I will be speaking immediately after this debate about the issue of Israel and Palestine, I will not cover that now. I am, however, very concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territories and will speak about that in more detail. I am glad to be able to tell the House that I confirmed this evening that the UN Security Council will be discussing the deteriorating Israeli-Palestinian situation in a closed session tomorrow.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. I ask that he utilise Ireland's position and his own to pursue the issues to which he has just referred in a way that makes it clear to the perpetrators that there is an end to all this, that there is retribution and that there will be justice for the victims in these cases. I did not refer to the antics of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the surrounding areas or the human rights abuses in China, but obviously we are well aware of them and the Minister himself referred to the latter. There are similar cases in other countries, some of which would claim to be democracies. Let us not forget the opposition leaders who are confined to prison as a result of speaking out. The erosion of democracy has continued in an alarming way, over the past 12 months in particular.

I know the Minister is committed to this issue but measures must be prioritised within the UN and the EU with a view to ensuring all such perpetrators recognise that, as and from now, there will be retribution and they will have to account for their activities. Previous similar perpetrators have ended up with long prison sentences from the courts in The Hague and there is this distinct possibility that they must go that route as well. That will soften their cough, as people used to say once upon a time, and focus their attention on the things they are doing now.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I hope it is clear from this question session that the protection of human rights is central to Irish foreign policy. The challenge, of course, is in being effective and not just saying the right things but actually being an agent for change in countries that are often a long way from here and from Europe. That is the real challenge. We must work out how to use Ireland's position within the European Union, the UN and the Security Council, as

well as the bilateral relationships we have with both big and small countries, to advocate for and protect human rights for vulnerable populations, of which there are many. As a reminder of just how many vulnerable populations exist, there are currently 75 million displaced people living in refugee camps.

The last time Ireland was on the Security Council, it was looking at 12 or 13 files. There are now 30, so that number has increased almost threefold. The real challenge for me is finding a way to use the platforms, opportunities and relationships we have, and the influence we are lucky to have as a small but influential international country, to derive the most impact we can out of those opportunities to protect people. We have spoken a lot, and will speak even more, about how we can do that in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is in a very worrying place right now. I assure the Deputy that approach will continue to guide us on these issues.

Middle East

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Apartheid is defined as “inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them”. Human Rights Watch has published a key report on this issue, of which I am sure the Minister is aware. It follows reports from Israeli human rights organisations B’Tselem and Yesh Din, not to mention respected Palestinian human rights organisations and the concerns of the UN, that Israel is basically operating an apartheid state. This report refers to “‘forcible transfer,’ ‘expropriation of landed property,’ ‘creation of separate reserves and ghettos,’ and denial of the ‘the right to leave and to return to their country, [and] the right to a nationality’”. It is a damning report. Does the Minister agree with it?

Deputy Gino Kenny: Most people watching tonight’s debate will be asking themselves what Israel needs to do for a country like Ireland, or any others, to start treating it as a normal state. According to this document from Human Rights Watch, Israel practices “the crimes of apartheid and persecution”. It is a state that exists on division, racism and state violence and a state that uses subjugation as a weapon to oppress the Palestinian people. Over the past 36 hours, the Israel Defense Forces, IDF, have killed 30 civilians, including ten children. How can the Minister stand over that? What did he say to the Israeli ambassador today? What consequences will the Israeli state face for murdering those children today?

Deputy Patrick Costello: Something the Minister said earlier stuck with me. He said he was glad to be able to use the United Nations to talk about how this situation has worsened, but the reality is what we are seeing is not new. It has been going on for a long time. I was in Palestine as a human rights observer in 2014 and I witnessed all the things the other Deputies have spoken about and which we are seeing on the television. They were not new then either. This conflict and all that has gone with it, including the dispossession, the apartheid, the house demolitions, the expulsions and the denial of human rights, has been happening for a very long time. We are basically watching a deliberate inflicting on the Palestinians of a way of life that is designed to remove them from certain parts of the territory, from East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank, to make way for settlers. This is not new and we need to act.

Deputy Chris Andrews: What is happening in Jerusalem is deeply disturbing. It is clearly an act of ethnic cleansing. As usual, the apartheid Israeli Government is using brutal force and

acts of aggression to carry out this land grab. Not only is the Israeli Government using its rockets and artillery to slaughter innocent families in the Gaza Strip while the world looks on, it is also using medical apartheid to punish Palestinians with the roll-out of the vaccine. How many atrocities and war crimes must happen before the Israeli ambassador is expelled or sanctions are imposed on Israel? When will this Government use its place on the UN Security Council to stand up to the rogue state that is Israel? I hope that the Minister will not be twiddling his thumbs tomorrow on the UN Security Council or doffing his cap to the big global powers, because that is what we are doing and what we have been doing. It is just words and talk. We need action, sanctions and divestment. How much longer will the Government stand by and watch the brutality of apartheid Israel?

Deputy Simon Coveney: First, I restate my profound concern at the overall human rights situation in Israel and Palestine.

I am aware of the recent report from Human Rights Watch. As I stated earlier, the report is a lengthy and complex document and it is being reviewed by officials in my Department. Human Rights Watch is a respected NGO, and I value the role it and other civil society organisations referred to by Deputies, such as B'Tselem and Yesh Din, play.

There is no doubt that Israel's actions have violated Palestinian human rights. Israeli policy and practices, which discriminate against Palestinians, result in unequal and unfair treatment. More broadly, unilateral actions have undermined trust between Israel and Palestinians, which in turn undermines the viability of a two-state solution. That in my view is the only permanent, sustainable solution. I am deeply concerned by the violence of recent days in East Jerusalem. I condemn the launch of rockets from Gaza into Israel and the aggressive and disproportionate response by the Israeli Defence Forces in their attack on Gaza. These events are terrifying for civilians on both sides, and deeply tragic for the families who have lost loved ones or whose relatives have been injured. The number of child casualties is particularly shocking. Civilians on both sides deserve much better.

As I mentioned earlier in replying to questions, I met the Israeli ambassador this afternoon and conveyed my concerns to him in the strongest terms. In response to the escalating violence in East Jerusalem, Ireland yesterday co-sponsored a meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the situation. At that closed meeting, we underlined that the Israeli actions in East Jerusalem and at the Al-Aqsa compound were not acceptable and were provocative and we called for Israel to comply with international law. The provocations and clashes in East Jerusalem, which led to many injuries at the holy site of Haram al-Sharif, or Temple Mount, are deeply worrying.

The approach of the Israeli authorities and security forces is not acceptable, and Israel must comply with international humanitarian law. Peaceful worshippers must be allowed to exercise their right to freedom of religion and to worship freely and without threats, violence or provocation in accordance with the *status quo*, especially during the holy month of Ramadan. The right to peaceful protest must be upheld for all, and the Israeli security forces must be held accountable for any acts against peaceful protesters. Ireland made these points in yesterday's Security Council discussion. We will obviously also be participating very actively in tomorrow's discussion, because things have developed significantly since yesterday.

I echo calls for all parties to refrain from violence and provocative acts, including the firing of rockets and incendiary devices from Gaza into Israel. I also raised the matter at the EU Foreign Affairs Council yesterday. I expressed my deep concern at the violence and threatened

evictions in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. The increase in evictions and demolitions across the occupied Palestinian territories is alarming and is no doubt contributing significantly to tension on the ground. Members will know I have been forthright in expressing my concerns regarding the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Ireland's position on this issue is and will continue to be based on international law and Israel's obligations as the occupying power under the Fourth Geneva Convention and the relevant resolutions passed in recent decades by the UN Security Council. Ireland has repeatedly made its position known at the Security Council, where the issue is discussed each month.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Finally, our approach is rooted in the illegality of Israel's occupation and the right of Palestinians to self-determination. Restrictions imposed on Palestinians undermine the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, a right which is at the heart of the two-state solution

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister will have a chance to come back in. There are four speakers with two minutes being shared between them, so each Deputy will have roughly 30 seconds. I call Deputy Mac Lochlainn.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: In the 1980s, the Dunnes Stores' workers started confronting the apartheid regime then in power in South Africa. Ireland then led the way in taking on that regime. Here we are today, and we cannot even ban goods from the criminal, illegal settlements in the occupied territories. That is what we have become. From a giant in the 1980s, we have become a minnow. The challenge now is for the Minister to stand up to this apartheid state, as Ireland has done in the past.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Unfortunately, I find the Minister's words hollow. Expressing his concerns to the Israeli ambassador is a weak response, to say the least. His counterparts in the EU are weak as well. Consider what is happening with the EU and the deal with Israel regarding economic development. It is incredible. Israel is not a normal state. It is a racist state, and it exists on racism.

Deputy Patrick Costello: We have spoken about this issue many times. I reiterate that the Minister speaks very well on this issue, and I believe he is sincere. He has been very good at supporting Palestine with Irish aid, and in that way. The frustration for the rest of us comes from that activity seeming not being followed through with the strong action needed to confront this sort of situation. For example, if the Minister believes in a two-state solution, then why not recognise the state of Palestine? It seems the two-state solution may be dead and gone, and without recognition of the state of Palestine it will definitely be dead. I ask the Minister to even follow through on that aspect.

Deputy Chris Andrews: Our position on the UN Security Council gives us a platform to finally do what is right for the indigenous struggle in Palestine. We saw what happened in South Africa when the world stayed silent. This time, however, we have a chance to be on the right side of history and to do what is right by the millions of people who have been killed and forced out of their homes and who live under occupation. Until this State recognises the state of Palestine in the same way we recognise the state of Israel, we are complicit in this ethnic cleansing.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We are not complicit in this ethnic cleansing. I do not accept those terms, but we are not. We are standing up and speaking out against what is happening.

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We are and have been all day-----

Deputy Chris Andrews: We need actions.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy talks about actions-----

Deputy Chris Andrews: Sanctions and divestment.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy must understand how sanctions work. Ireland does not have the legal capacity to introduce sanctions. We have had this debate repeatedly regarding the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018. We cannot legally do that. The EU has competence in trade issues, and it is not up to Ireland to make its own decisions. I am not going to do something which is not legally sound in response to this issue. What I will do is try to build strong consensus where it matters and where that can be the basis of requiring and pressuring change.

That is exactly what we did last summer, by the way, when Ireland, with Luxembourg and others, led the EU position regarding a clear statement and warning to the Israeli Government that if it moved ahead with annexation of the Jordan Valley, then there would be significant consequences for its relationship with the EU. That was a significant contributing factor in Israel not going ahead with that annexation. That is what Ireland does. Rather than standing up here and saying what some people want to hear, I am interested in trying to save lives in cities like Gaza, where some of us have had the privilege to visit at different times. I have been there on multiple occasions.

Deputy Chris Andrews: So have I.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is what I am interested in.

Deputy Chris Andrews: It is not about who has been there the most.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy does not want to hear this, but I am interested in trying to use Ireland's privileged position on the UN Security Council, as we have been doing this evening, to try to get a debate tomorrow to ensure we can raise our concerns where it matters and where we are likely to get a real dividend, initially in respect of-----

Deputy Chris Andrews: It is not working. We need action.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----a ceasefire and then a process that I hope in the months ahead-----

Deputy Chris Andrews: The Minister needs to advocate for action.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----can protect the interests of both parties.

Housing Issues

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: During Covid-19, more than ever, we have all seen life-changing things happen. In that regard, a home is so important for people, and there is the saying that your home is your castle. In that context, I raise the qualifying thresholds for social housing, which are too low, especially in my area of Carlow. A review is being done, and I am

here to ask the Minister of State about the status of that review. I would also like to know if we are looking at those thresholds realistically. Ten years have passed since the latest review of income thresholds to qualify for the housing list. I recall, as a Senator, speaking with the Minister of State, Deputy English, at the time and then it was said that a housing review was being undertaken.

It is unacceptable that we have been waiting on this review for ten years. I believe that this is resulting in the exclusion of genuine people who should qualify for social housing. It is unacceptable that people who are trying to work and make ends meet are being told that they do not qualify for the housing waiting list. I have consistently raised the issue and have been told that it is being looked at. People in County Carlow are caught in limbo because they do not qualify under the social housing income threshold but they do not earn enough to afford a mortgage. There they are caught again. When one is not on the housing list, one does not qualify for HAP. For example, if someone is paying rent for accommodation of €12,000 or perhaps €13,000 per month - and rents in Carlow have soared in the past few years - he or she cannot save for a mortgage.

The Housing Agency Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2020, which was published earlier this year, states that the number of households in County Carlow that qualified for social housing supports by the local authority in 2020 was just 505, down from 519 in 2019, which is not a true reflection of the number of households that need social housing there, at least not if I can judge it from the conversations I have with people.

The Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 set the maximum net income limits for each local authority in different bands according to area, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard household means policy. There is an urgent need to finalise the review of these limits and to increase the income eligibility limit for social housing in County Carlow and most likely in other counties. Carlow currently has one of the lowest income thresholds in the entire country. The maximum net income for a single person is €25,000; for a couple with no children, it is €26,250; for one adult with one child, it is €25,625; for two adults with one child it is €26,875; and for two adults with more than one child, it is €27,500. This compares to a limit of €38,000 in County Kildare for two adults with one child and €39,000 for two adults with more than one child. Not only is it unrealistic to have such a marked difference between counties, the limits are a disincentive for opportunities that will increase household income.

The idea of welfare is to help people get on their feet, not to cut them to the knees to qualify for unrealistic caps. That a difference in approximately €11,000 exists in income thresholds between counties Kildare and Carlow is unacceptable. The Minister of State is from the same area as me. The difference in income thresholds between counties Carlow and Kilkenny is €6,500. That is not right. Unless a person is on the local authority housing list, he or she will not get HAP, so the income threshold needs to be increased. We must ensure that this is done.

It is most important that action is taken on this issue. It is unacceptable. Everyone has seen hard times, but it is more important than ever that we give families the chance to qualify to go on the local authority housing list.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I acknowledge that this is an issue that affects my own constituency as well as 14 other local authorities in the country.

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Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended. The 2011 regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in three different bands according to the area concerned. The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%, and separately an additional allowance of 2.5% for each child.

It is important to note that the limits introduced also reflected a blanket increase of €5,000 introduced prior to the new system coming into operation to broaden the base from which social housing tenants are drawn, both promoting sustainable communities and also providing a degree of future-proofing.

Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those most in need of social housing support. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this, providing for a fair and equitable system of identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs from their own resources.

As part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority area has commenced. The review will have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordability and cost rental and will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been considered.

The programme for Government, Our Shared Future, clearly lays out our commitment to putting affordability at the heart of the housing system. The Government approved priority drafting of the affordable housing Bill 2020 on 22 December 2020, the general scheme of which was published on 20 January 2021. The Bill includes provisions to underpin three schemes delivering on the Government's commitment to prioritise the increased supply of affordable homes through affordable homes for purchase delivered by local authorities, a new affordable purchase shared equity scheme for private homes and the introduction of a new form of tenure in cost rental. The Bill was approved by Government last week and it is intended to bring the Bill before the Oireachtas in the very near future to allow for the commencement of the scheme this year.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: It is very worrying that ten years have passed and there is still no date for the completion of the review. I really worry about that.

I do understand the new initiatives that have been introduced by the Government. I will provide the Minister of State of the example of the Rebuilding Ireland home loan. First-time buyers can apply for a Rebuilding Ireland home loan to purchase a new or second-hand property or build their own home. They can borrow up to 90% of the market value of the property. The maximum market value for properties in County Carlow is approximately €250,000. However, this year, just one Government-backed mortgage has been approved for a first-time buyer in County Carlow, out of four applications. I have seen the figures in other counties and the refusals are worrying.

Are the criteria right? Why is it that out of four applicants in County Carlow, one was approved? We are here promoting Rebuilding Ireland home loans. I am worried about this issue.

I wish to raise another concern. We all want to make sure that people can buy their own homes, and homes that are affordable. In particular, we want to ensure that those who do not qualify for the housing list are in the position to buy their own homes. We must ensure that the programme for Government enables people to buy affordable houses that are actually affordable. It is the same with the shared equity scheme. It is most important that we give the younger generation that opportunity to own their own homes. We have seen this past week the concerns raised about funds buying large housing estates. We cannot allow that to happen. We must ensure that the young people get the chance to benefit from affordable housing and shared equity schemes and can get on the local authority housing list. We must ensure that we get this right.

I know that there are some good initiatives coming up in the programme for Government and I welcome that, but we must ensure that there are no obstacles in the way and that we get it right.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: As I have stated, affordability is at the heart of Government policy in the programme for Government. I also wish to confirm that the review of income thresholds has commenced. As I have outlined, no final recommendations will be made until the determination can be made on the impact of the parallel affordability initiatives.

I am aware that this affects 15 local authorities in total, namely, those in counties Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Donegal, Galway, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Mayo, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary and Westmeath. Like Deputy Murnane O'Connor, I have spoken with Carlow Chamber of Commerce and have met on a number of occasions with Carlow County Council because I know that it is a cause of serious concern in County Carlow, as I am sure it is in the other counties I have mentioned. Once the review is complete, it is our intention that a recommendation will be made. That is our commitment.

Vaccination Programme

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I would like to thank the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, for coming to the House to reply to this issue. It is most disappointing that the Minister for Health is not present to take it, given that it concerns a health issue in Arklow in our constituency. I am disappointed and frustrated that he is not here to answer this question for the people of south Wicklow.

On 15 February 2021, the Minister for Health announced that a number of vaccination centres were going to be set up across the country. Two of them were to be in County Wicklow, with one located in Greystones and the other in the Arklow Bay Hotel. The centre in Greystones has been operating for approximately five weeks. It has been offering some children's vaccinations and giving Covid vaccination appointments for three weeks' time. The centre in the Arklow Bay Hotel was to open on 11 May, which is today. Until now, people from Gorey, Arklow, Tinahely and throughout south Wicklow were travelling to Greystones to get their Covid vaccinations, while people from Greystones had to travel to Dublin. The plan was that the centre in the Arklow Bay Hotel would open today and people from south Wicklow and north County Wexford would access vaccinations there instead of having to travel to the north of County Wicklow.

As it transpired, the vaccination centre in Arklow did not open today. We have a situation

where the Arklow Bay Hotel was contracted for a three-month period to provide vaccinations but now it seems it will not open and there will be a grand total of zero Covid vaccinations given there.

I have three questions for the Minister of State in this regard. First, how did this situation arise? Only last week, the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, was in Arklow to avail of a photo opportunity in the hotel. The story was all over the local newspapers. How are we in a situation where, less than one week later, the vaccination centre is not open, there was apparently no preparation for it to open, no one was told what was happening and we only found out today it is not opening? Second, what is the plan B for the residents of south Wicklow and north Wexford? Third, what will happen to people in the interim while a plan B is put in place?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputy for providing me with the opportunity, on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, to update the House on the roll-out of the Covid-19 immunisation programme and vaccination centres. The vaccine programme is a key enabler of the reopening of society and the economy. It continues to progress, with more than 1.8 million doses administered overall. The programme has passed the milestone of the administration of 500,000 second doses and, this week, we expect to pass the milestones of having administered 1.5 million first doses and 2 million total doses. The plan is to distribute in the region of 250,000 to 270,000 vaccines to the system this week. Vaccines will go to GPs, hospital groups and vaccination centres.

A total of 38 HSE vaccination centres will operate on an eight-hour basis, seven days a week. This will increase to 12 hours a day when supply allows. These centres support the vaccination of the general population in a safe and efficient manner. Each centre varies in size and operating hours and has been selected based on population density, ease of access, transport and parking. There is at least one vaccination centre for each county. As of 5 May, there were 35 HSE vaccination centres open and operating. The 36th centre, in Carrick-on-Shannon, is planned to open on 12 May. There has been very positive feedback from members of the public who have accessed vaccination appointments in their local HSE vaccination centres in the past week.

The Arklow Bay Hotel Covid-19 vaccination centre was scheduled to open for the administration of vaccinations today. However, following last week's announcement on the reopening of services, the hotel has indicated it will return to operating as a hotel business. The result is that the facility will only be available to the HSE until the end of May. From a logistical perspective, it does not make sense to operate a Covid-19 vaccination centre at the facility for the short time involved. The HSE is actively exploring available alternative sites for a vaccination centre in the south Wicklow-north Wexford area. A number of sites are being examined by HSE Estates and Community Healthcare East, in partnership with South East Community Healthcare.

Pending agreement on a south Wicklow-north Wexford site, the HSE is maximising the capacity at the Aviva and Greystones vaccination centres. As staff numbers increase in the Aviva facility, the number of available appointments will rise by an additional 400 to a total of 3,000 daily when all 29 booths are open. The vaccination capacity at the Shoreline Greystones centre will be increased by moving from a 12-booth to a 15-booth model. The change to the physical infrastructure at the Greystones site is already complete. As more staff come on stream, the hours of operation will be extended to 12 hours per day. This will allow a total of 1,400 appointments to be offered daily. People in the Arklow area who are registered on the public

portal will be offered appointments at the Shoreline centre in Greystones. Those in the north Wicklow area will be offered appointments in the Aviva centre. This has been the approach in recent week while awaiting the full opening of the Arklow Bay Hotel centre.

I acknowledge the efforts and flexibility of the HSE staff in ensuring the success to date of the roll-out of the vaccination programme. I thank them for their continued commitment to the programme.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I recognise this matter is not part of the Minister of State's remit and he has been left to explain this particular failing in the system. However, some of his response does not make sense. He stated the centre at the Arklow Bay Hotel was to open today but, because there are only three weeks left before the hotel returns to its usual business, it does not make logistical sense to have it operating for that period. I do not understand why the HSE is not using that particular facility for the next three weeks. The staff in Arklow were ready to go and had to be stood down. According to the statistics given by the Minister of State, using the centre for the next three weeks could potentially result in 12,000 to 15,000 people being vaccinated. That is surely a good thing and would give the HSE time to find a plan B. Will the Minister of State ask the HSE to look at using the Arklow Bay Hotel for the next three weeks? I assume the State has paid for a three-month contract, yet not a single Covid vaccination has been administered there. It seems like a wasted opportunity not to use the site for the next three weeks.

There are huge problems for people from south Wicklow in accessing the Greystones centre. There is limited public transport available and that is causing a lot of problems. It does not make sense to have people going to Greystones from Arklow and elsewhere in south Wicklow as well as from County Wexford while people in Greystones have to go to Dublin to get their vaccine. I have spoken to the National Transport Authority, NTA, about putting in place a bus service from south Wicklow and north Wexford to Greystones. Today, I telephoned Wexford Bus and was told the company is keen and eager to provide a service. I ask the Minister of State to contact the NTA to make sure public transport provision is put in place. That should have been done already. It is critical that it be provided now given there is no plan B for people from south Wicklow to get their vaccinations.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I understand the HSE has decided that it does not make sense from a logistical perspective to operate a Covid-19 vaccination centre at the Arklow facility for the short period involved. The vaccination roll-out programme continues to demonstrate agility and responsiveness to revisions in the advice on the use of vaccines and changes to vaccine delivery schedules. The public online registration system was launched on Thursday, 15 April, commencing with appointments for 65- to 69-year-olds before extending out to include all those aged 60 to 64. Last week saw the commencement of registrations on the portal system for the cohort aged 50 to 59. From Thursday, 13 May those aged 50 will be invited to register. To date, more than 34% of the adult population identified to receive a vaccine have received a first dose and almost 13% of the adult population are fully vaccinated. The programme remains on track and Ireland compares favourably with our European neighbours.

There is a great sense of optimism and relief at the numbers of people getting the vaccines. I got a text message this evening calling me for vaccination tomorrow. I will be leaving in the next 20 minutes to drive to Sligo to get my AstraZeneca vaccine at 9.30 in the morning. I am very happy and excited to be getting it. The Deputy will have seen the sense of relief and optimism among those who receive their vaccines.

11 May 2021

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Justice has completed its consideration of the Perjury and Related Offences Bill 2018 and has made amendments thereto.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.30 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 12 May 2021.