



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 1 Meitheamh 2021

Tuesday, 1 June 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tens of thousands of people have gone back to work this month and many more will go back in the weeks ahead as restrictions are lifted. This is very good news because people need and want to be back at work. Their enthusiasm to return was demonstrated last year when 400,000 went back to work as restrictions were lifted. Workers do not want to be on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. They, and indeed all of us, hope such supports will be required and necessary only for the shortest possible time. The reality is that, come September, some people will still be locked out of work due to public health restrictions. Among them will be those in aviation, hospitality and events, those whose jobs depend on international travel and those in many other sectors. That is why the Taoiseach's decision to start cutting the PUP by instalments of €50 from September is premature and deeply unfair.

It has always been understood that when the Government stops people from going back to their place of employment, for good public health reasons, it has a responsibility to support them. It seems now, however, that the Government has chosen to pull the rug from under the workers. I heard a woman on the radio last week who said she remained locked out of work despite the reopening. She described her experience and said that for the first six months of lockdown, her family availed of the mortgage break and that when that went, the family tapped into their savings. Now that money is gone too. How on earth is it fair to say to this woman or thousands of workers like her who will not be back at work in September and may not be allowed back until next year that their supports are going to be cut? The Taoiseach is walking away from his responsibility to these workers and their families. He will cut their income, in effect, by one third. That is absolutely huge. It is the difference between them just getting by for the next few months and not doing so.

For the vast majority, the need for the PUP will fall away naturally as sectors reopen. That is what the evidence tells us but the Taoiseach's decision to cut the PUP ensures those who remain locked out of work will be made poorer. They still have to pay their mortgages, rent, childcare fees and utility bills but they will be abandoned by the Government when they are at

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the end of their tether. What happened to “We are all in this together”, as was the slogan of the Government? The Taoiseach promised no cliff edge but cliff edges mean nothing to those who are relying on every single euro. To slash payments by €50 a go is devastating when workers are prevented from working.

What the Taoiseach now proposes is a mirror of the plan he wanted to introduce in January but it was the wrong approach then and it is the wrong approach now. His approach to this matter sends out a signal that the recovery he envisages is one that is unfair and leaves people behind. Let us not go down that road again. I ask the Taoiseach not to press ahead with these cuts and to ensure that full support will remain in place for those workers who are prevented from going to work for as long as they are prevented from doing so.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I agree with the Deputy in terms of the good news in recent weeks that people are returning to work in considerable numbers. We have been in a position to do this through our management of the pandemic and through a successful and efficiently run vaccination programme which is having a dramatic impact on the severity of illness in society from the virus and on reducing death and hospitalisation and numbers in intensive care. The efficient national vaccination effort is enabling us to return to economic growth and recovery and to bring people back to work.

What we announced today in terms of extending the schemes is a continuation of that economic recovery story. We have fulfilled our commitment in terms of not having a cliff edge. The employment wage subsidy scheme supports 315,000 workers. We are extending that to Christmas. The whole idea is to support enterprise and to enable enterprises that retain jobs to stay viable and keep jobs going in the economy.

We are doing the same with the Covid-19 restrictions support scheme extension with enhanced restart payments of three weeks at a double rate. This will be significant for people in hospitality, for example, and in other sectors. This significant restart grant really gives people a fighting chance not only in maintaining the employment they have maintained under the supports they have got from Government but by increasing employment in the coming weeks. We know that more and more people will come off the pandemic unemployment payment during the summer months. We are extending the pandemic unemployment payment out to September. Then, gradually, we are easing out of that up to February 2022.

We are not just doing that. All of that is in parallel with an unprecedented work activation programme with substantial funding being allocated to reskilling training programmes, upskilling programmes, education places, increased apprenticeships and increased internship programmes. There will be more placements available in the public service for many people and investment in research to create a new approach and new orientations within the economy. We will use the funding we are receiving from the recovery and resilience fund in Europe not only to invest in the human capital side and in people but also to create new jobs in retrofitting and public transport. This is what we are going to do with the railway project for Cork, which will be significant in terms of leveraging other economic and employment opportunities there. That is one example. Another is the new facility in Beggar’s Bush. The new Department building there is a pathway finder building. It will be state-of-the-art in terms of emissions reduction and so on. This is an imaginative programme designed to prepare the country for recovery in the coming period and to start growing jobs in new sectors like the green economy and digital transformation. It is about giving the supports to aviation that are required and about clarity in direction of travel in terms of the reopening of international travel and the events industry. Sig-

nificant supports are in place for musicians under the music entertainment business assistance scheme. This will support musicians in wedding bands or those who perform in smaller live venues. We are initiating a basic income pilot scheme for artists.

This is a significant comprehensive agenda ultimately with a view that by 2024 we will have 2.5 million people in jobs. That will exceed the numbers of people in employment before the pandemic. The broader objective of Government is to create opportunities for people to return to work.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Be that as it may, the Taoiseach will acknowledge that come September there are workers who will not be returned to work and who will not be in a position to get back to work. The Taoiseach knows that. The economy will not be operating at full tilt by September. The Taoiseach knows that. Yet, the Government is choosing to cut the supports that these workers and their families rely on. Everybody wants to get back to work as quickly as possible. However, the State and the Government have to make provision for the section of workers who will not have returned by September or even during the course of this year, including workers in aviation, events and hospitality. It is wrong and unfair to punish those workers who cannot return to work because of a public health emergency. I again put it to the Taoiseach that the fair thing to do is for this Government to tell every worker that we want them to return to work quickly and safely but also to support them for as long as they cannot return to work because of the public health emergency. I invite the Taoiseach to do that rather than to cut the very support these people need to survive and which they will need through September. Many of them will rely on it until the end of the year.

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, hotels, bed and breakfast accommodation and guesthouses will open again tomorrow. This will create jobs and get people back to work. Next week, restaurants, pubs and other facilities will open. All of that will help. Last February, approximately 481,000 people were on the pandemic unemployment payment. This figure has already decreased to 334,000 and it will continue to decrease over the summer months. We have extended the pandemic unemployment payment until September.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government will then cut it.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy and her party's spokespeople agreed that it would have to be phased out. Deputy Doherty is on the record as saying that. No one expected emergency pandemic payments to remain forever. We now want to allocate resources elsewhere. We will help everybody who has difficulty getting a job as we move into the latter half of 2021. Very substantial resources are being put into upskilling provision in terms of places in further education, apprenticeships and third level education. The thousands of workers who have been supported through the employment wage subsidy scheme should also not be forgotten.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There are many positive things in today's plan, particularly the supports for small businesses, which are critical in creating employment. Will the Taoiseach address the issue of people who have lost their jobs as a result of the Covid pandemic? He has repeatedly promised that there will be no cliff edge when it comes to the withdrawal of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, yet today he has announced that there will be such a cliff edge. No matter what level of restrictions are in place across the country in September, payments will be reduced by €50. A further reduction of €50 will occur in November and a final reduction of €50 in February. In total, this amounts to a massive 40% cut to an already meagre payment. This is the very definition of a cliff edge. The Government has chosen an arbitrary

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date and determined to cut people's payments, no matter what the public health advice is at that time and no matter what jobs are or are not available. These payments are a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of people whose jobs were casualties of the pandemic.

Experience tells us that, when businesses reopen, people will go back to work. They do not want to remain on the PUP longer than they have to. Last year, 400,000 people closed their PUP claims once the economy partially reopened. Since this payment was introduced more than a year ago, just 3,000 complaints have been made to the Department of Social Protection by employers alleging that staff were reluctant to return to the workforce. That is 3,000 out of more than 600,000 people, or 0.5%. The Department has also clarified that the vast majority of those 3,000 cases did not involve any misclaiming. Why then has the Taoiseach done what he has sworn he would not do? Why has he created a cliff edge for those in receipt of this payment, a cliff edge which will undoubtedly lead many more into poverty?

As the economy opens up over the summer months - a reopening that everyone in this House hopes will be very successful - the numbers in receipt of the PUP will significantly reduce naturally. There is no evidence that this payment is being abused or that people are preferring to claim the PUP rather than return to work. Despite this, the Taoiseach's Government has introduced a cliff edge in September, when there will be an initial 15% cut which, as I have said, will grow to 40%. A reduction of that magnitude will cause serious financial problems for those people who can least afford it. It has been a very tough year for everyone but especially for those who have been forced out of their jobs because of the pandemic. They have now been told by this Government that their meagre income will be slashed in September, even if the business in which they work has not reopened. This announcement will cause serious stress and anxiety among a large cohort of people, many of whom are barely keeping their heads above water. Why has the Government broken its promise and introduced a cliff edge for the PUP?

The Taoiseach: I disagree fundamentally with the Deputy. We have not introduced a cliff edge. The opposite is the case. We have extended the PUP to September, following which there will be a phasing out of it out to next February, which will be second anniversary of the introduction of the payment. By then the payment will have been in place for two years. It was originally introduced for 12 weeks. That was the original timeframe the then Government put in place for the PUP. The pandemic has lasted much longer than that, obviously.

We want to create employment opportunities for people. I agree 100% that people want to work. There is no suggestion by Government or anybody that there is any abuse of the payment. Rather, we are saying that we now have to reorientate the economy and reallocate and target resources for growth and for economic recovery. That means creating substantial funding for work placement programmes, training programmes, education and higher education. For example, we want to create new jobs in retrofitting in the private sector in private housing, but also in the public sector through direct grants. We will need skill sets to enable us to do that comprehensive programme for retrofitting across the country in terms of our housing stock. People will have to retrain and reskill to do that type of work.

Likewise, a substantial allocation will be provided for the re-wetting of bogs. There will be new opportunities in the economy. It is about what we do now as we emerge from the pandemic and people naturally come off the PUP, as they will, and are, in significant numbers. It should be remembered that all the while we are supporting workers in employment as well through extensions of the employment wage subsidy scheme and the Covid restrictions support scheme. The orientation of the plan is to support workers to retain the jobs they are in and are currently

being subsidised and to give companies a fighting chance to retain those jobs and enhance them, and, by enhancing them, recruit people.

I will make one final point. Deputy McDonald made the point that Government has stopped people from going to work. The Government has not stopped anybody from going to work; the Covid-19 virus has stopped people from going to work and it caused the most severe and rapid recession since the wars across the world. Government has responded comprehensively to this pandemic and in a very effective way. We have underpinned income and jobs to the best of its ability and we will continue to do that, but we are moving into a new phase in economic recovery. That new phase involves the targeting and allocation of resources that can create new opportunities in new sectors of the economy, and, crucially, more support for sectors, such as aviation, tourism, the arts and live events, in the coming months, which is what we are doing in the allocation of resources.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach spoke about other sectors. The investment in other sectors is welcome, but it is not going to help people who will be unable to get a job by next February. Those people lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. The Taoiseach has accepted that it will not be possible to reboot the economy by next February. What is he saying to those people who will not get their jobs back by next February? He is saying to them that they can sustain a cut of 40% in their already low income. The Taoiseach will know from the studies that have been done that the basic social welfare payment is not sufficient to maintain any kind of life of dignity, yet the Government, by its actions, is forcing those people onto the breadline. What is the justification for cutting people's incomes by 40% when many of the jobs that were lost will not be reinstated by next February? We hope many new jobs will be created, but it is undoubtedly the case that there will be still high levels of unemployment among those people who have lost their jobs. What is the Government offering those people who cannot get a job by next February? At the moment, all it is offering them is a 40% cut in pay and that is going to drive them into poverty.

The Taoiseach: By the Deputy's own admission, hundreds of thousands of people came off the PUP last year and so I think she is overstating the case. The same will happen this year. I do not accept that people currently on the PUP will not be able to get a job in the economy in the coming months. I think there will be a significant recovery. Sustaining it for the medium term is what the plan is about. It is not just about the immediate sort of bounceback that will happen in some sectors. It is also about maintaining that for the medium term. That is why we are allocating resources to new sectors. It is to give added funding to sectors that can create new jobs, economic activity and economic momentum, which is very important, and to underpin all of that with training and reopening the economy, as we have been doing over the past number of weeks. Construction, full retail and personal services are back. Tomorrow, hotels, guest houses and bed and breakfast accommodation are back. The vaccination programme will continue to be rolled out. We look forward to restaurants and pubs reopening next week and further openings in July, all of which will create employment opportunities and facilitate people naturally coming off the pandemic unemployment payment.

Deputy Michael McNamara: One of the weekend newspapers billed the Government's reopening measures as "going for broke". I sincerely hope that was not a pun and that the plan will succeed. I have been quite critical of some of the Government measures. The Taoiseach has never taken any responsibility for some of those measures and has always said it is because of Covid that this, that or the other has closed. On the other hand, he has said we have fared better than other countries. He has taken the credit but not the downside.

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I have long argued that I would have preferred to see fewer restrictions on society and the economy generally and more targeted interventions. One area in particular that needed targeted interventions was the nursing home sector and, in fairness, the Government provided the temporary assistance payment scheme, TAPS, for the sector. However, we are learning now that in conjunction with the measures the Government is announcing, it is simultaneously taking away that temporary assistance to nursing homes. I accept that the scheme is temporary but, equally, it is essential. The threat in general has not subsided and the threat has not subsided for nursing homes in particular. We know congregated settings are a risk, whether that be direct provision centres, where there was an outbreak in Ennis last week, meat factories, where there are continuing risks and outbreaks or, indeed, nursing homes. There was an outbreak very recently in Marymount nursing home in Cork, in the Taoiseach's constituency, notwithstanding that all the staff and residents are vaccinated.

Continuing measures are necessary in nursing homes and in congregated settings more generally. If that is not funded through the TAPS, how will it be funded? We all accept that we cannot go back to the situation as it was before and that there had to be a change in practices in nursing homes. I very much welcome that change. The committee I chaired recommended a systemic change away from reliance on nursing homes towards care in the community. In conjunction with that committee, the previous Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, set up a nursing home expert panel. The Government has not implemented any of the recommendations of the committee I chaired or the expert panel, yet, at the same time, it is taking away the supports nursing homes currently have to introduce safer practices. How are nursing homes to pay for this? If not through the TAPS, will there will be an increase in the amount they are paid through the fair deal scheme? We all accept that greater measures have to be taken and those measures must be paid for.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. We will have to agree to disagree in terms of the issue around the imposition of restrictions in society. The measures we have taken overall have resulted in fewer deaths in Ireland and less severe illness than in other countries that took a different approach. Ultimately, the role of Government is to protect lives and public health to the very best of its ability.

In terms of the nursing homes scheme, and the TAPS in particular, the first point I have to make is that the results from the vaccination programme have been very significant in terms of nursing homes, with a reduction almost to the point of elimination of severe disease in nursing homes, among both staff and residents. The serial testing is revealing that and new protocols for visiting nursing homes have been introduced as a result. That has been very positive and needs to be acknowledged. The Government has allocated very substantial resources under TAPS. It provides contributions to nursing homes towards the cost of maintaining isolation rooms and provided a one-off contribution towards temporary visiting infrastructure during winter 2020. Over 6,675 claims have been processed and approved since 10 May. Approximately €93.9 million in direct financial support will be provided to the sector in 2021, with €42 million provided so far. That is a very substantial allocation of resources.

In addition to TAPS, the HSE has provided other enhanced measures to support nursing homes and their residents in the context of Covid-19: the Covid response teams, access to PPE and oxygen, support for staff accommodation, access to training and the serial testing programme. As Deputy McNamara will know, priority vaccination was provided to nursing homes and the uptake has been extraordinary. I think it is at nearly 99%. The strong vaccine effect is very evident in the nursing homes, with huge reductions, as I have said, in the numbers of cases

and outbreaks and in mortality.

Essentially, we are now into a different phase of the pandemic as we speak. The vaccination programme is having an impact. There are consequences to that as we move forward and allocate resources in a more targeted manner. Again, the Government will be there to support nursing homes. At the time of the introduction of TAPS, our nursing homes were in a far different position in respect of Covid-19. The outbreaks that were occurring are no longer occurring at all or in no way to the same extent or frequency. TAPS was part of a wider suite of supports. We should now evaluate and take lessons from the pandemic as to how in the medium term we can ensure a more supportive environment for nursing homes.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Taoiseach did a good job of outlining what TAPS supported, and I welcome that, but how will that be supported now? He says there will be supports. I am told that nursing homes that have contacted Ministers in the Government have been told that if there is an outbreak moneys will be made available, but the point of all this is to avoid outbreaks, in particular those in congregated settings. Notwithstanding the high take-up of vaccines, there are still outbreaks, unfortunately. They are fewer in number and their consequences are lesser, I accept, but we need to avoid the outbreaks and their consequences. The Taoiseach talked about lessons being learned. We will have to look at the spread of Covid-19 in healthcare settings and congregated settings. I think a tribunal will have to be considered to look at the earlier deaths in nursing homes in particular and whether people were sent home or sent into nursing homes from acute hospitals with Covid. How will nursing homes fund the measures that continue? Yes, the risk is lesser but it is still greatest among a certain cohort, and funding needs to be provided in that regard.

The Taoiseach: The supports have been very extensive. That needs to be said because very quickly they get read into the narrative and taken for granted. They have been exceptional supports because the pandemic has created a need for exceptional supports. As we get situations under control, however, the same level of supports will not be sustainable in many areas. We can work to support nursing homes in the event of any outbreaks, for example, such that assistance would be available to a nursing home in an outbreak.

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is too late.

The Taoiseach: The vaccination programme has had a very significant impact in bringing the situation within nursing homes under control. This does mean that we have to reconsider both the level and scale of supports if the situation comes under control in any given environment or situation. The more important point is the medium-term relationship between the State and the private nursing home sector, how it will evolve now and how we learn lessons from the pandemic in respect of that relationship.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I wish to speak about the very sensitive issue of suicide and the effect it has on the people in our country and their families, friends and neighbours. Sadly and tragically, more than 4,000 people have died through suicide in the past eight years. We have seen changes in that time and I thank the current and past Governments for the efforts that have been made and the moneys that have been invested in psychiatric services. Of course, we could be critical and say that more should be done, but I want to go through the positives of what we have been trying to do and highlight what we need to do to try to save more lives, which is what I want to achieve by having this debate with the Taoiseach in an open and frank way.

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There is an onus of responsibility on each of us throughout political parties and the Independents. We have a job of work to do, that being, to try to save people in every way we can. Unfortunately, I have seen a new issue arising in my own county and across the border into County Cork, that is, the tragic deaths of mothers of young families, including in recent months, leaving families devastated. This has concentrated my mind on the issue. I was grateful to have had the opportunity to serve for many years on a psychiatric services committee on the old Southern Health Board. I like to think that I learned a great deal about mental illness in all its shapes and forms. I commend organisations like Pieta House on its Darkness into Light fundraiser, through which it has raised millions of euro in recent years; the Samaritans; local GPs; counsellors; and people who do their best.

I wish to speak about young people, who face a new problem, that is, online bullying and social media. This brings new challenges. The Ceann Comhairle will respect the way I wish to deal with this matter, as I will not mention a specific case, names or the like. Recently, there was an event in our courts system where a person who told untruths online was punished financially for doing so. We need to see more of that. We need to see more challenges being taken against keyboard warriors, these bullies who are intent on intimidating people. I know that, when I sit down this evening, I will receive a text message or another message from a particular individual who has taken it upon himself or herself in recent years to get on my back. I do not give a damn about this person because I am able for that type of abuse, but what about younger people who have to put up with such nonsense? It might tip them over the edge on a bad day.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I thank the Deputy for the question and for the very constructive and non-partisan manner in which he has raised the issue. This is an extremely important issue that always has to command the full attention of the House across all political persuasions. Families and communities the length and breadth of the country have been affected by suicide. It is important to continue to raise awareness and to speak openly about mental health. That is important within our education curriculum and outside of our education curriculum.

The Connecting for Life strategy is Ireland's national suicide reduction strategy. It aims to reduce suicide and self-harm rates across society and in priority groups. We have the National Office for Suicide Prevention within the HSE. It was established to co-ordinate suicide reduction efforts around the country and to implement the strategy. Funding has increased on an annual basis, but it is not just about funding alone. It is about the proper delivery of services and co-ordination. Suicide prevention funding would have gone up progressively from about €3 million ten years ago to about €13 million or so now. Also, the National Office for Suicide Prevention works with the non-governmental and community sector in particular and with the HSE in an advisory role. About 20 partner non-governmental organisations are involved and 54% of the funding would go to those non-governmental organisations - groups like Pieta House, the Samaritans, Suicide or Survive and the Family Resource Centres.

It has been a while coming, but about 24 of the 26 emergency departments now have access to a mental health professional at all times, I am informed, through liaison mental health services based in acute hospitals or the national clinical programme for the management of self-harm in emergency departments. That is important. In addition, prior to the pandemic, community mental health teams provided access to a seven-day per week mental health service. This is still in place and available for existing mental health service users in a blended format in compliance with Covid-19 restrictions. The seven-day telehealth service includes the crisis text line 50808, *yourmentalhealth.ie*, the information line 1800111888 and NGO partners' online supports.

Access and traffic to all of those services has increased during the Covid-19 period and we have an extra obligation to do more now during this period and its aftermath to support people, and young people in particular. That is why an education and well-being initiative, as part of funding that was allocated in the return of schools during the Covid-19 period, is focusing on the mental well-being of young people.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The main message to get out of this debate is that no one should ever need to feel alone. It is making the connection between the person who is at a critical time in his or her life and making it easier for him or her, whether that is through the local GP, calling the Samaritans, or calling a friend, but also accessing the services that are there that the Government is funding. It is about making a person feel in this country that there is no need to feel lost or alone. You can put up your hand, dial your phone or call out for help and that help is there.

Every one of us, and especially politicians because we are quite simply dealing with so many people every day of the week, should be looking out for people's mental health as well as for all of the other aspects of their lives that we try to positively impact upon. We should be on our guard because if by doing our work properly we can save any people going through the torture and anguish that is suicide, it would be a job very well done. It is an onus and responsibility that each of us have, which we should take very seriously and conscientiously.

The Taoiseach: I agree 100% with what the Deputy said. We always have to watch out for the vulnerabilities in others and be alert and aware. As he said earlier, we should be open in talking about mental health and about suicide but also in letting people know, which I consistently say to young people, that they should be kinder to each other. In life, people should be kinder to each other than is often the case and the Deputy referenced that in his earlier remarks. It is very important in a group or crowded setting to be very conscious that not everybody may be happy at a given, particular point in time or in a good position. We then have to provide supports in the access to GPs, community health teams, or a mental health professional within the community, which the Deputy has referred to.

My view, having been in the Department of Health quite some time ago, is we need to continue to strengthen the community health teams across the length and breadth of the country. In speaking to some senior psychiatrists and to people who have been involved in mental health service provision for years, they felt that we were overly institutionalised as a country, overly focused on the acute phase of mental illness and less so on the community side. We need to build up strong community mental health teams.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach and I also thank Deputy Healy-Rae for raising that important issue. It might also be appropriate for me to remind Members present that support services for the Oireachtas community are available should Members or staff require them. The truth is that none of us are impervious to online abuse or constant misrepresentation, which many people experience.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: The House has agreed that for the duration of the Covid emergency only, the rapporteur's report of the Business Committee shall be taken as read. Arising from it, therefore, there are three proposals to be considered today. Is the first proposal for dealing with

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Tuesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Matt Carthy: No. The House needs to have a debate on the EU agricultural talks and this needs to happen this week. It is not good enough to suggest that a discussion can take place after the negotiations are over. We need to hear from the Minister as to why he has adopted an approach to those negotiations that will disadvantage the majority of Irish farmers. Unfortunately, we are dealing with this in the context of the Government having agreed to an EU budget that will see Irish contributions increase by up to €1 billion per year-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot go into the detail of it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----while the proportion spent on the CAP will fall from 37% to 30%.

A Ceann Comhairle, this is very important. This week, we learned that two farms under the control of Larry Goodman received €414,000 last year in CAP payments-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me, Deputy, we are not going into-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----and a farm owned by a sheikh received more than €222,000-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: These are the inequalities and the Minister is trying to prevent equality measures being put in place. We need that debate this week.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, can we have a little order?

Deputy Michael Collins: On Friday last, there was an international incident off the Castletownbere coast. A Spanish-registered fishing trawler, illegally fishing in Irish waters, attempted to ram a Castletownbere fishing vessel. The Valentia Coast Guard was called at 8 o'clock to send out an emergency service, and 12 hours later, assistance came to the aid of these fishermen-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, what does that have to do with today's Order of Business?

Deputy Michael Collins: In that time, there was attempted ramming several times. All I want today is a debate on this issue, as to why the Taoiseach's officials, the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA, and the Valentia Coast Guard were contacted and nothing happened-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot go into the detail.

Deputy Michael Collins: The fishermen's livelihoods are at stake. I want a debate on that issue today, if at all possible.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Members please have some respect for the processes here? We are not meant to be having lengthy debates on these matters.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There is growing public concern about the prospect of the new national maternity hospital being gifted to a private entity, and the implications of that from the taxpayer's point of view but also regarding the ethos that will apply in those circumstances-----

An Ceann Comhairle: What has that got to do with today's Order of Business?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: This was raised with the Taoiseach a couple of weeks ago-----

An Ceann Comhairle: What has it got to do with today's Order of Business?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach said he would come back on this. Will he provide time this week to respond to people who raised this, following his discussions with the Minister for Health?

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Taoiseach have anything to say on today's Order of Business?

The Taoiseach: I reject the assertions by Deputy Carthy that the Minister, Deputy McCool, is endeavouring to disadvantage Irish farmers-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: He is.

The Taoiseach: Nothing could be further from the truth. It is an outrageous assertion to make-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister should come before the House and explain himself.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt the Deputy. The Minister is committed to agriculture and Irish farmers, and genuinely so. That should not be taken by-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: He is fighting against every redistributive measure at EU level.

The Taoiseach: He is not.

Deputy Matt Carthy: He should come before the House and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's mask slips every so often in regard to his basically anti-European Union position, in terms of net contributions and all the rest. He has fought against the European Union all his life-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: The Deputy will present everything and create a negative narrative on the European Union.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Carthy, will you control yourself?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has been against the European Union all his life.

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind everyone that we are not meant to be having lengthy debates about these matters. Is the Taoiseach prepared to change the Order of Business or take on board any of the proposals?

The Taoiseach: I want to be co-operative but if assertions are made that have nothing to do with the Order of Business-----

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An Ceann Comhairle: Those assertions should not be made.

The Taoiseach: In that case, I think we will have to deal with that in the Business Committee because it is a recurring feature that this is an extended part of Leaders' Questions. That is what is going on here.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are dealing with it and there will be-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me. We are dealing with it and alternative arrangements will be brought forward for our next sitting.

The Taoiseach: The issues have not come to a conclusion, so we will have time for a debate next week.

To respond to Deputy Michael Collins, he did not ring me, and if the situation was that serious, he should have done so.

Deputy Michael Collins: I rang the Taoiseach's office in Dublin that morning, and they put me through to the Cork section and I have got no reply since.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy-----

Deputy Michael Collins: I left a message. The Taoiseach has to correct the record of the Dáil.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy knows how to ring me. He rang me often enough previous times.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have never in my life rang you, because I have never got any satisfaction from you.

The Taoiseach: You did when you were first elected-----

Deputy Michael Collins: You rang me looking for a vote but I knew you would turn your back on the people of west Cork, and I would not vote for you. Never once did I ring you.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please-----

The Taoiseach: You were trying to get a deal done for yourself. You were talking to everybody.

Deputy Michael Collins: Not once. Shame on you to lie.

The Taoiseach: Leaving that to one side, there is no issue with us having a debate next week or the week after that. This is an ongoing issue. We will respond to the specifics of the case.

In terms of Holles Street hospital, Government proposals have not come before Cabinet. There will be time for a debate on that and for me and the Minister for Health to bring clarity to the House, but it has not come before Government.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 27; Níl, 17; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>		

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

Question declared carried.

3 o'clock

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

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is not agreed. There is a proposal with regard to a Bill,

which will provide that restrictions and lockdowns can continue indefinitely. That Bill is being guillotined. If the Government believes this is the right thing to do, then it should debate the proposals with the Opposition. The Government has the numbers. If it morally and intellectually believes this is necessary in the interests of the State and society, debate it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too object strenuously to this. We had no pre-legislative scrutiny of the legislation, which relates to four Acts. There was meant to be a cancellation of the sunset clause in June. The legislation is being guillotined with two and a half hours debate tomorrow for all Stages. It is a total insult to democratically elected people here and is unacceptable. I am fully opposed to it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We need to have a debate this week on the ongoing CAP discussions. It is a matter of recorded fact that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine is at a European level fighting against every proposal that would see a redistribution of CAP funds from the beef barons and sheikhs back to smaller family farmers.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made these points.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I propose a debate on this process be placed on the agenda for Wednesday so the Minister can engage in a proper debate on the matter.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I agree with that objection. I also want to raise a point about the proposal to take a motion without debate to give an instruction to committee to deal with the amendments to do with the climate action Bill, considering they are outside the scope of the Bill. It is a basic point of parliamentary scrutiny. Substantial changes are being made to the Bill in respect of the petroleum minerals section and the ESB. For example, we have a concern that the provision in the amendments that allows the Minister to grant further licences to companies that already have licences could create a problem by creating an expectation among companies. We need to have a debate on that and on the issues around the ESB.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Health and Criminal Justice (Covid-19) (Amendment) Bill has far-reaching implications for the public. Draconian powers are proposed to be extended. Many Government backbenchers have serious concerns about this, as have a large number of Opposition Members. The idea of guillotining it is not acceptable. We should allow time for people to express their views on this important issue.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I add my voice to that. Never in the history of the State have I seen a Bill that bypassed the democratic processes by so much. Some 40,000 people received fines in the past year for going about normal activities. The Taoiseach has bypassed the Dáil to go to RTÉ and make announcements, while Deputies cannot get a chance to challenge him on this. The idea that a Bill of such import would be guillotined in such a manner is absolutely wrong.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I raise the matter that every sector of the community is open except pubs and restaurants. The Government says they can open 5 July but many people do not believe it. We need a proper and full debate here to see what the Government has against pubs in rural Ireland and ordinary punters who want to go for a pint. Surely the Government can trust the publicans and the people. Their mental health is not in a good place. The people in rural Ireland and County Kerry have been closed down and isolated for long enough.

An Ceann Comhairle: I should not have called Deputy Danny Healy-Rae because Deputy Mattie McGrath, I am just realising now, had been called and it is one speaker per group.

The Taoiseach: I would love a pint myself at some stage.

An Ceann Comhairle: I would like one now or something stronger.

The Taoiseach: I would say by the time today's sitting is over.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Taoiseach would want to be careful not to be treated like Keir Starmer.

The Taoiseach: People in County Clare are much more tolerant than that.

Deputy Michael McNamara: They are. The people of Cork may not be.

The Taoiseach: People in County Clare are much more tolerant than that. Deputy Carthy is outrageously misrepresenting the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, in terms of what he is about on behalf of the nation and Irish farmers.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: He hit the nail on the head.

The Taoiseach: Coming from Donegal, the Minister is very well aware of those who need supports and he will continue that approach.

Deputy Matt Carthy: He is fighting against the interests of Donegal farmers.

The Taoiseach: As I said, I think we can deal with that issue when we come back. Likewise, the issues raised by Deputy Paul Murphy on the climate action Bill can be dealt with on Committee Stage.

I am somewhat taken aback by the views of Deputy Shortall and Deputy Tóibín. Deputy Shortall was an advocate for zero Covid, as were many Deputies, and now they are questioning whether we should facilitate the continuation of the framework that we have had since the beginning of the pandemic, which facilitates the passing of laws, when necessary, to protect lives and public health. What is being proposed is no more than that in terms of its extension. I do not understand how we can be zero Covid one month and the complete opposite the following month.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is-----

The Taoiseach: Through the Chair, I do not think it is. In response to Deputy Tóibín, by and large, the public have understood that the Oireachtas has had to take measures to protect lives and public health. There is no other agenda than that. The Government wants to open up society. The good news, in response to Deputy Danny Healy-Rae's point, is that we are opening up society. The hotels, bed and breakfasts and guest houses are opening tomorrow.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The pubs and restaurants will be opening next week. We want to continue reopening in June and in July.

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

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

1 June 2021

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 19; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Michael McNamara.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed. I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald on promised legislation.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The property developer, Hammerson, has submitted their planning application to develop the area around Moore Street, as the Taoiseach will be aware. Indeed, they released a statement last night, which included a glowing endorsement from the Taoiseach. We now have the disgraceful situation where we have a Government that has not

alone surrendered apartment homes in the city of Dublin to private investors and absentee landlords, but a Government that now supports a plan to turn one of the most significant sites in modern Irish history over to a private developer. Shame on the Government for taking that stance. I remind the Taoiseach that last March the Dáil voted to support a State-led plan for the regeneration of this area, based on a Moore Street cultural quarter. This is the correct plan for the area, which will enhance the heritage, history and culture, and embrace the uniqueness of this site.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Her time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I invite the Taoiseach to desist from standing with the private developer and actually to pursue the approach as agreed by the Dáil as recently as last March.

An Ceann Comhairle: I invite the Deputy to adhere to the allocated time.

The Taoiseach: I must say the Deputy's cynicism and the cynicism of her party is beyond disgrace. They pretend to work with people for years on a project, which they did on this one, and then, at the 11th hour, they do another side turn and try to create a new agenda, a new narrative, to try to demonise those in government and demonise other parties. Nos. 14 to 17 Moore Street is in the possession of the State thanks to good work by previous Governments in securing that vital property in terms of our history and the preservation of our history. What the Government is not prepared to do is stand over continuing neglect of central Dublin more generally, of O'Connell Street and surrounding streets. What Sinn Féin wants to do is just preside over ten more years of neglect, ten more years of dereliction, ten more years of nothing happening and it is just let us get another campaign that we can get the keyboard warriors on, let us get another campaign so we can try to demonise people in government and demonise other political parties.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

The Taoiseach: I am fed up with this kind of cynicism. It is absolutely disgraceful cynicism. It is similar to them voting against every single housing scheme that has come before councils in recent times, opposing housing on a non-stop, consistent basis. Are they for any development at all?

Deputy Alan Kelly: I want the Taoiseach to give clarity today on what is happening in regard to the freeze on redundancy rights. Workers need clarity on this. I raised it with the Tánaiste in March and, to be honest, he said it was a complex issue but he did not give an answer. Workers need certainty. Hundreds of thousands of workers could lose out on payments because they spent time on the PUP. We need to know if that is going to be used in regard to calculable entitlements for their actual redundancy. Every worker is entitled to two weeks of pay for every year of service when made redundant. Normally, after four weeks of lay off, a worker has the right to demand the return to work or to seek redundancy. We need certainty but we have not been able to get clarity on this issue from anyone in government for a long time. Will the Taoiseach give clarity to workers in regard to the extension of redundancy? Will service under PUP be countable towards that redundancy payment?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has raised a very important question. It will be extended for the last time until September and it will not be extended beyond September. No workers will lose out. A scheme is being developed which will make sure that workers get their entitlements-----

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Deputy Alan Kelly: Including PUP services.

The Taoiseach: Yes. As this is unique, and it is in a pandemic environment, we want to make sure that workers are not disadvantaged and that neither are employers. It needs a bespoke approach to deal with the issue the Deputy fairly raised. It is a fair point. It has been a very difficult balance to get right throughout the pandemic. Workers have rights that have to be affirmed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. We are out of time. I call the Social Democrats.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Today the Government published the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. It is also Global Day for Parents. That is ironic because despite the €915 million being allocated in the economic plan there does not appear to be a single additional cent set aside for investment in early years and childcare. That is despite childcare being a fundamental foundation for the economy and for gender equality and despite our embarrassingly low investment in childcare. Will the Taoiseach explain why he did not use this opportunity to invest significantly and properly in our early years and childcare sector and in families across Ireland?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy for her brevity.

The Taoiseach: We have invested very heavily in childcare this year, and in early years, not just through budgetary provision but also through the extension of the variety of support schemes-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: There is no additional money in the budget for childcare.

The Taoiseach: -----we have allowed for in today's plan. It has been quite substantial.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Last year when the Government was talking about cutting the PUP, I asked the Taoiseach's predecessor, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, a very simple question which he refused to answer. I hope the Taoiseach will give me a straight answer to a straight question. If he thinks the €350 pandemic unemployment payment is too high will he at least agree to live on that until he cuts it in September? Today a series of Ministers, who are highly overpaid - these people are on more than €350 a day, never mind a week - talking about how we need to cut back on the PUP. Those who are on PUP want to be back at work but we all know that by September, many people will still be unemployed against their choice, and whole industries will be shut down. Will the Taoiseach agree to go on €350 if he thinks it should be cut?

The Taoiseach: We are extending the pandemic unemployment payment out to September and then gradually easing out of that into February of next year. The pandemic unemployment payment will have been in place for two years before it ceases. The overwhelming purpose of Government is to create employment opportunities for people who are unemployed or who are on the PUP. Very substantial resources are being allocated as a result of the economic recovery plan that was published today to enable people to secure employment, not just in areas where they had previously been employed but perhaps also in new areas, and very substantial resources have been provided for training, upskilling and reskilling programmes. Close to €4.5 billion is being allocated to a range of measures-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Some 315,000 workers will be supported through the extension of employ-

ment wage subsidy scheme, for example-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat. With the Taoiseach's co-operation, I will finish questions from the last three leaders or their representatives.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Thanks for not answering.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This weekend an enormous number of young people have been literally hammered from on high over their congregation in a number of public spaces in Dublin. It stands to reason this has happened because the public spaces where they would normally congregate have closed so people have been corralled into smaller spaces.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: If pubs and restaurants were open during that time, people would have had a chance for people to socialise in a structured fashion-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, we are over time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach see to it that those pubs can open outside before the weekend so we do not have the same situation at the weekend?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am just letting in the next two leaders and then the Taoiseach can answer all three.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I cannot hear a word from the Minister of State, I am sorry, he will have to use the microphone.

Deputy Jack Chambers: There are two Government Deputies and a Sinn Féin Deputy on the list, as per Dáil reform. If the Leas-Cheann Comhairle is accommodating the additional two leaders from the groups, we should also accommodate the two Government Deputies and the other Sinn Féin Deputy who are on the first list. To be fair, it is important to accommodate all speakers who are here.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I just want to-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, resume your seat for a moment.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: They are reserved slots.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Resume your seat for a moment. If I have made a mistake, I apologise. I am not accommodating all the Deputies in the groups. If I have made a mistake, I have made a mistake. I am letting in the three leaders. That was my understanding. I apologise. We have run out of time.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Dáil reform.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I was simply trying to facilitate Deputies. If Deputies are not in agreement, I will not do it but I would ask them to let me use my discretion. That is all I can do. I am not facilitating everyone, there is no time. We are way over time. Deputies do not agreeing with me and that is fine. I am not having a discussion on it. If they do not agree with me, that is okay.

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Deputy Brendan Griffin: There is a solution which is allowing the reserved slots as well. It is very simple and everyone gets to have their say.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have no time. We are way over time. It is not a question of that. I am going to drop it altogether. There is no co-operation. I am sorry Deputy McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wanted to raise the same issue as Deputy Tóibín.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, it can go back to the Business Committee. I thought that I might have Deputies co-operation. I am going to leave it there as we are out of time. Deputies might realise that others do not get in when time runs over on both sides.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I missed two meetings to be here for Questions on Promised Legislation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am really sorry.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We need to look at a better system.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You are wasting time, Deputy. I really tried my best to facilitate. Deputies should go back to the Business Committee. The time is up. I am really sorry for those who have been waiting patiently.

Report of Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Motion

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

That the Standing Orders 106 and 107 of the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business be amended as provided for in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform dated 31st May, 2021, entitled 'Amendments to Standing Orders relating to remote participation in Committee meetings', a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 1st June, 2021

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Departmental Projects

1. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the resource efficiency action plan for 2021 of his Department. [28338/21]

2. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the resource efficiency action plan for 2021 of his Department. [23896/21]

3. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the resource efficiency action plan for 2021 of his Department. [26510/21]

4. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the resource efficiency action plan for 2021 of his Department. [26513/21]

5. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the resource efficiency action plan for 2021 of his Department. [27889/21]

6. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the resource efficiency action plan for 2021 of his Department. [27890/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, together.

My Department's 2021 resource efficiency action plan sets out a range of actions to improve the management of energy, water, material and waste resources within the Department and to increase sustainability awareness among staff. It also includes levels of energy and water usage and waste produced by the Department so that improvements can be tracked and measured following implementation of planned actions. The 2021 plan was developed in line with guidance published by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and was published last month on *gov.ie*.

Implementation of the actions set out in the plan will be overseen by the Department's green team, which comprises staff with responsibility for and-or an interest in driving progress in this area. This will build on progress made to date, including retrofit of lighting to LED bulbs in Government Buildings, sensor lighting installed in bathrooms, increasing staff awareness and promoting positive behaviours, elimination of single use plastics and single use drinking cups, installation of mains drinking water, sensor taps installed in main bathroom areas, and brown waste bins and recycling stations installed.

My Department also reports annually on energy efficiency initiatives and savings achieved through the SEAI monitoring and reporting portal. These results are published annually.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Deputy O'Callaghan is not here so I am taking his position.

Has each Department produced its resource-efficiency action plan for this year? When does each one intend to publish its plan?

Much of the heavy lifting associated with biodiversity and climate action is being done by local authorities. They are doing a fantastic job in many instances but they claim they are not being funded. Can we fund them to appoint more biodiversity officers, in particular, to take the pressure off all the staff who are carrying the weight in this regard? When does the Taoiseach intend to extend the process to the State Departments?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: All Departments are required to prepare resource-efficiency action plans. In the area of waste, these plans reflect wider changes implemented by previous Governments in terms of how businesses and households manage their waste. Departments must increase the number of facilities for recycling and composting and discontinue the use of single-use plastics throughout the organisation.

Households have been separating out their recyclables and compostable waste for some time but the reality is that there is no clarity on where this waste goes exactly. We are aware that some local authorities across the country still operate an any-bag, any-bin policy and that some private operators incinerate all waste collected from the black bin, the blue bin, or even the brown bin. Practices across the public and private sectors are in direct conflict with the Govern-

ment's current roadmap for waste planning and management, limited as that plan is. There are firm commitments to the circular economy, yet the mass production of unnecessary plastics by very profitable companies continues. There is no coherent and measured strategy to deal with planned obsolescence. Does the Taoiseach know where his Department's compostable waste goes? If not, he is not alone because Ireland simply does not have the industrial composting facilities needed to meet waste-separation needs.

What accountability mechanism has the Taoiseach put in place to ensure the programme for Government commitment to a new national waste action plan comprehensively addresses the existing shortfalls in the existing strategies?

Deputy Bríd Smith: Covid, probably more than anything else, has shown us how people, particularly workers, are our best resource. Workers, not only those on the front line but also others of all hues, beaver away doing essential tasks and allowing society to tick over. While we sit here debating the greater things in life, we rarely think of the centrality of workers in our society. We rarely think of them as a resource that could make our society much more efficient. In this regard, what does the Taoiseach think of the Fórsa campaign for a four-day week, Fórsa being the trade union leading the campaign? How might Ireland use a four-day week, as Spain is doing, to become one of the first countries in the world to lead a trial that would show how the associated work practice changes could have a double-whammy impact in that they would improve both the environment and levels of equality? The four-day week would improve the environment because, as studies have shown, changing to a four-day week can help to reduce emissions. It would improve our equality agenda because studies have shown that where a four-day week is implemented, fathers and partners, particularly men in relationships, can play a more caring role, a role that women are normally forced to play. There is a double benefit. Could the Taoiseach consider and comment on the dividends in terms of the green agenda and the equality agenda, in addition to the human improvement that a four-day week would afford?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I also want to follow up on the question of the four-day week. The Four Day Week Ireland coalition has highlighted how moving to a four-day week could reduce carbon emissions by up to 16% while also improving people's work-life balance and mental health. It is an important demand raised by the trade unions and the environmental movement and it constitutes an important part of the eco-socialist green new deal that we advocate. Earlier this month the Tánaiste said the four-day week was not something his Department was even considering. Are the Taoiseach and his Department considering it? If not, will they? Too often, tackling climate change is presented as being a matter of eco-austerity, greenwashing, new taxes on workers and cutting back on people's living standards but it does not have to be, and must not be, that way. Instead, an eco-socialist approach is about raising the quality of people's lives and tackling climate change together, transforming people's lives for the better and avoiding the climate catastrophe that is on the way. The demand for a four-day week without loss of pay is a perfect example of the approach. The approach allows the workers' movement and the environmental movement to come together to fight for this objective.

Deputy Alan Kelly: When it comes to managing waste, I do not want to let this opportunity go without talking about the scenes of litter and waste in Dublin city, as have been profiled in recent days, particularly online. Some of the reasons for consternation and blaming young people are outrageous and wrong. Young people have suffered so much over the past 18 months. We have a genuine issue in that we are telling everyone to enjoy an outdoor summer but we need to prepare for it, not just in Dublin. Luckily enough, I come from near Lough Derg on the River Shannon. Ms Maura Boyle of Larkin's in Garrykennedy was on to me about the volume of

people down enjoying the area at the weekend. It is fantastic. It is a question of the level of waste left behind by some people. It is very difficult at times for some people because bins may be full and children and everything else may need to be managed. Across the country, in both urban and rural areas, as we face another bank holiday weekend, we do not need to close streets or anything like that. That just pushes people in other directions. We need to ensure, as my colleague Senator Bacik said eloquently earlier, we need more bins, more benches and more bogs for people. We need them pretty rapidly for an outdoor summer. We can all be safer and it can be enjoyed more. Local authorities need to provide them.

The Taoiseach: Local authorities need to respond. I agree with Deputy Kelly on that. We are successfully reopening society and the economy. The vaccination programme is making that possible, as is the adherence of the vast majority of people to guidelines for a prolonged period of time, which has had the desired impact of suppressing the virus or keeping it at reasonable levels. The vaccination programme, in particular, has reduced ill health and mortality and kept hospitalisations at a reasonable level. The number of intensive care unit admissions is down.

Regarding the preparation for outdoor activity, particularly for young people, outdoor facilities must be provided proactively by local authorities. Some local authorities have been very proactive regarding the pedestrianisation of streets. They have accelerated their pedestrianisation programmes. The Ministers responsible for tourism and housing, Deputy Catherine Martin and Deputy Darragh O'Brien, respectively, have provided funding for outdoor facilities so both establishments and councils can enhance the public space for people. That is the way to go.

I agree with Deputy Gannon's point that local authorities have been particularly effective. They have to make a decision based on the allocation and resources they get. With regard to biodiversity officers, I encourage their appointment. I would have been at the forefront of the appointment of archaeological officers in my time on the council. The appointment of a biodiversity officer is a key appointment. Most local authorities are embracing biodiversity. It is the cumulative impact of all the little things we do regarding biodiversity that will have the biggest impact. The wild garden that is being developed on Leinster House lawn, as opposed to the manicured lawn, is delightful to see. That is the type of initiative we need across the country. I will talk to the relevant Minister about the appointment of biodiversity officers specifically.

On Deputy McDonald's questions, the Cabinet sub-committee on the environment and climate change met yesterday in respect of the circular economy and objectives associated with expanding it. Ireland can do far better than it has been doing in that respect relative to other countries. I outlined earlier the significant progress made in my Department in terms of energy savings, waste disposal and the elimination-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Taoiseach, we are over time. Please finish the reply to the questions.

The Taoiseach: -----of single-use plastic and a range of other waste.

Deputies Paul Murphy and Bríd Smith raised issues in respect of a four-day week. Again, I would love to see the economic model for this and a presentation on it. There is one major question that the Deputies did not put forward. Who would pay for all of this? How would all of this be facilitated? In politics we will be a long way before we get to a six-day week, never mind a seven-day week. There is a five-day week at the moment. There have been moves to

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try to improve working hours and so on. The remote working strategy is being promoted by the Government and will be legislated for to facilitate reduction in carbon emissions so workers will not have to go on a five-day basis into the town or city or wherever. Where possible, they can do some of the work at home. There is a great deal of work to be done to flesh out the proposal that has been put forward by the Deputies.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am afraid we are not going to get to the three rounds of questions because of the time. I am simply forewarning Deputies.

Urban Development

7. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the role of his Department in Dublin's north east inner city initiative. [23898/21]

8. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the role of his Department in the north east inner city initiative. [26503/21]

9. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the role of his Department in the north east inner city initiative. [28387/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 to 9, inclusive, together.

The Mulvey report, Dublin North East Inner City: Creating a Brighter Future, was commissioned by the Government and published in February 2017. The report contained recommendations for the social and economic regeneration of Dublin's north east inner city. The report has been further supplemented by the publishing of the next strategic plan, which runs from 2020 to 2022. Both documents are available on the Dublin north east inner city, NEIC, website.

In June 2017 an independent chairperson was appointed by Government to the NEIC programme implementation board. Members of the board include representatives from relevant Government Departments and agencies, business and the local community. The board is assisted in its work by six subgroups: enhanced policing; maximising educational training and employment opportunities; family well-being; enhancing community well-being and the physical landscape; substance use misuse and inclusion health; and alignment of services.

The board and its subgroups continue to meet on a monthly basis to oversee and progress the implementation of the Mulvey report and the NEIC strategic plan. Officials from the Department of the Taoiseach work closely with the board, the subgroups and the dedicated programme office based in Seán MacDermott Street. The chairperson of the board reports to an oversight group of senior officials chaired by the Secretary General of my Department. This group, which has met 11 times to date, ensures strong and active participation by all relevant Departments and agencies and deals with any barriers or issues highlighted by the board. The Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality provides political oversight of the NEIC initiative. The Government is committed to supporting and investing in the north east inner city community and ensuring the board has the necessary resources to achieve its targets and fulfil its ambition. To this end the Government has made available €6.5 million in funding for the initiative in 2021.

I will set out some highlights of what the initiative has delivered to date in 2021. There is strong support, both financial and otherwise, for the recently launched north inner city local

community safety partnership. There is an increased Garda presence in the area with the Garda community support van supporting a focus on community policing, particularly throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. A Garda project focused on drug-related intimidation continues to have positive benefits. Funding has been provided for the training of local gardaí and local community-based practitioners in addressing domestic violence and child protection issues. There is the ongoing roll-out of the P-TECH initiative in secondary schools - the pathways in technology programme - in the NEIC area. A highly successful work experience programme in flash mentoring has been delivered for second level students in the NEIC. Funding has been provided to develop an adult and community education strategy for the area. Substantial funding has been provided for a community case management team that will work with the most vulnerable and high-risk families in the area. The funding of a dedicated parenting support co-ordinator post has been provided. There is funding to provide access to fast-track counselling for children and young people in the area. A significant investment has been made in a bespoke sport, recreation and well-being programme for the area. Dedicated community events and arts programmes have been funded for 2021. A full-time intercultural development co-ordinator is employed for the area. Funding has been provided for a recovery case manager and recovery coach internships. We have seen the continued operation in the NEIC of Ireland's first social inclusion hub. Funding is provided for a homeless case management team. Funding is provided for a residential stabilisation programme. Funding is provided for the City Connects programme. Funding is provided to the local early learning initiative and the refurbishment of the swimming pool on Seán MacDermott Street. Finally, there is a multidisciplinary team of psychologists, occupational speech and language therapists. I will read the rest into the record.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Funding is provided to support the SWAN detached youth programme. A green ribbon project has been rolled out with an environmental clean-up and litter prevention measures in partnership with local residents. There has been the purchase of almost 500 laptops and devices to support students in NEIC schools with home learning through the worst of the pandemic.

In 2021, some €1 million of the €6.5 million NEIC budget has been allocated to the social employment fund, through which 55 posts have been filled in community projects providing childcare, youth services, elder care, cultural and environmental services.

This responsive and innovative initiative has been widely welcomed within the community.

The programme implementation board will continue to implement the remaining actions set out in the Mulvey report and the NEIC strategic plan 2020-22 as well as adopting a greater focus on long-term sustainable outcomes which operate in an integrated framework and add value to the existing service infrastructure. Progress reports on the NEIC initiative are available on the NEIC website for 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020.

The Government remains committed to supporting and investing in the north east inner city community and ensuring the chairperson and programme implementation board have the necessary resources to help to make the area a better place to work and live.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Of course the neglect and poverty in the inner city of Dublin, as in other inner city and other areas throughout the State, is not accidental. It has happened on the watch of successive Governments and is in fact the consequence of bad policy, as the Taoiseach knows.

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To create the brighter future to which the Taoiseach referred, it is imperative that we invest in our children and in early education. That is what I wish to raise with the Taoiseach today. Early education providers in Dublin's north inner city have been adversely affected by the new national childcare scheme. In fact, up to 80% of children attending the early learning settings that cater for the most disadvantaged children are now in difficulties because of this new scheme. The viability and sustainability of these centres is under question. The parents of children attending these services are currently unemployed. Therefore, the subvention is reduced.

The providers in the inner city have raised these real concerns with the Department. They have spent months trying to resolve this issue. Their single wish is to ensure that children in the inner city, especially the most disadvantaged children, have access to early education. Yet, they have found no solution. They have suggested the implementation of a DEIS model to sustain these children. I implore the Taoiseach to intervene on the matter and not allow these children to be failed again.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The north east inner city task force has done extraordinarily good work but there is more work to be done. How much is the Taoiseach engaged in the programme of implementation? Has the Department or the Taoiseach been briefed on whether the Rutland Street School community hub project has gone to tender yet? When is work expected to start? If the Taoiseach is engaged, he will be able to reply and answer that. The plans for this were announced in 2016. It is now five years later. It was originally believed that it would be funded by central government but now much of it is from the resources of the council. There are numerous competing projects, as the Taoiseach can appreciate. Is it being funded under the urban regeneration fund? If not, why not?

The Labour Party has called for a Mulvey-style commission or task force on the north side of Dublin and another in Drogheda. My colleagues, Senator Marie Sherlock, Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and Deputy Ged Nash, have campaigned for this for a long time. We do not believe we can simply police our way out of crime alone. We agree that the plan put in place some years ago had some merit but it needs a great deal of work.

It seems from the evidence that this Government's commitment needs to be renewed. A task force or Mulvey-style commission would really help to deal with many of the ingrained problems in the area. In the Taoiseach's reply he might respond directly about the Rutland Street school community hub project.

Deputy Gary Gannon: In the north inner city, sport has always been a great leveller and a great outlet for young people. Yet, in the Mulvey report, sport seems to be the great omission. The Taoiseach read out the list of funding initiatives but there is little that pertains to sport. There are two great soccer clubs in the north inner city, Sheriff Youth Club and Belvedere FC. Both play on an astroturf pitch in Clontarf. The pitch is completely outdated. The pitch has a lifespan of approximately seven years but it has been at the grounds now for 11 years. It is outdated and needs investment. That needs to happen. There is no GAA club currently in the north inner city. That is something we need to factor in to our considerations because there is a great desire for GAA in the north inner city. It is in the shadows of Croke Park. The local boxing club in the heart of Dublin 1 applied for a grant for female changing facilities some weeks ago. Those involved were turned down. The boxing club is flourishing but there are no facilities for-----

The Taoiseach: Who was turned down?

Deputy Gary Gannon: It was Corinthians Boxing Club. It is in the heart of the north inner city. They need a female changing room.

The Taoiseach: Who turned down the club?

Deputy Gary Gannon: I think it was the council. That will need to be addressed because there is a great desire for boxing in the north inner city.

The Seán MacDermott Street swimming pool remains closed. It has been closed for two years. The students in the Central Model Senior School in sixth class are running their own campaign. I would love to see them supported in this campaign to get the pool open so that they can have a swim in it over the summer. It is a really viable facility.

The Taoiseach: Funding has been provided to assist in the refurbishment of the swimming pool on Sean McDermott Street. Other supports are going into the area. I refer to the SWAN Youth Service, the detached youth work programme and the Green Ribbon Project, through which environmental clean-up and litter prevention measures are being rolled out. I refer also to the purchase of almost 500 laptops and devices to support students in north-east inner-city area schools with the home learning that has been ongoing during the pandemic. A sum of €1 million has been allocated to the social employment fund, through which 55 posts have been filled in community projects providing childcare, youth services, elder care and cultural and environmental services. These measures have been broadly welcomed.

I will address some of the issues that have been raised. With regard to the Rutland Street School site, Part 8 planning approval was granted by Dublin City Council in October 2019 and an enabling works contract to the value of €780,000 was completed in 2019. This was a lead-in contract to assess structural loading, asbestos volumes and so on in advance of main contract works. Tender documents for the main construction contract were issued in July 2020. The main construction contract for the Rutland Street School redevelopment is in the final stages of the public procurement process. Following completion of restricted procedure stage 1 in the fourth quarter of 2020, a number of shortlisted firms were invited to submit tenders for stage 2. Evaluation of these tender submissions is currently under way and it is anticipated that this process will be completed in the coming weeks. That is good news for this particular development. I agree with Deputy Gannon.

Deputy Kelly made the point that we need to create area-based partnerships such as that created in the north-east inner city elsewhere. I have tasked my Department to work with the Cabinet subcommittee on social affairs to identify a number of areas of disadvantage or areas with particular challenges for which to prioritise supports. This was the approach of the old revitalising areas through planning, investment and development, RAPID, programme which we created years ago when I was last in government. The idea is that clubs and organisations in those communities are to be given higher ratings when applying for funding. This would mean that Corinthians Boxing Club, for example, would be more highly prioritised. I will ask the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to look at the area of boxing because some clubs need support both in making applications and in making sure that they are successful in getting the supports they urgently need in partnership with local authorities, the county and city councils. Such clubs do great work.

I would like the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to work with Dublin North East Inner City and with the sporting groups in the community in respect of

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soccer, GAA, which the Deputy mentioned, and other sports. This is where investment should go. I have no difficulty in working with Government to provide capital investment in these areas for sporting facilities, particularly AstroTurf pitches and so on in inner-city locations.

With regard to childcare, I will speak to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in respect of investment. There has, however, been sustained investment in childcare in inner-city areas. There has also been sustained investment in education. Going way back, I was involved in providing funding for Larkin Community College. There has been consistent engagement and support. I take the point made in respect of housing. I will engage with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, with regard to the issues pertaining to childcare. More generally, housing has a role to play in the revitalisation of the area. In addition to supporting the existing community, we have to work to ensure that younger generations can aspire to housing within the community. We have to work to refurbish existing housing stock and to create new housing provision in the area. The early years are important but, as I pointed out in my earlier reply, I am very committed to the provision of multidisciplinary supports from physiotherapy to speech and language therapy and occupational therapy for children. A multidisciplinary team-based approach is vital.

Taoiseach’s Meetings and Engagements

10. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his latest engagement with the social partners. [28339/21]

11. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent engagements with the social partners. [26235/21]

12. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent engagements with the social partners. [28066/21]

13. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent engagements with the social partners. [29779/21]

14. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent engagements with the social partners. [29782/21]

15. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent engagements with the social partners. [29785/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 to 15, inclusive, together.

The Government recognises the importance of regular and open engagement with all sectors of society. As we enter the early stages of recovery from the pandemic and as we work towards reopening our economy and society we need to work together on a shared common purpose. This is particularly important as we face the enormous challenges ahead, including climate action, digital transition, disruption to the labour market and housing.

There are many different fora in place for these conversations, including the National Economic Dialogue, the National Economic and Social Council, various sectoral groups and initiatives such as the citizens’ assemblies. There is also regular bilateral engagement at official and ministerial level, of which I am very supportive.

As committed to in the programme for Government, a social dialogue unit has been established within the economic division of my Department. Its initial focus is on supporting and enhancing engagement with the social partners, including through existing mechanisms such as the labour employer economic forum, LEEF, which deals with labour market issues. LEEF helped ensure useful discussions between Government, employers and trade unions during the Covid-19 pandemic and I chaired the most recent meeting in February where, along with Brexit and Covid-19 issues, we discussed ways to strengthen social dialogue and engagement with civil society and representative groups. A further meeting of LEEF will take place shortly.

In addition, I met with the environmental pillar on 21 May, and will meet with the community and voluntary pillar and the farming and agriculture pillar in the coming weeks, to discuss how social dialogue can be strengthened and to exchange views on issues pertaining to those particular sectors. We had a very progressive and constructive engagement with the environmental pillar on a whole range of issues from climate change legislation to the circular economy and biodiversity.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I want to divert the Taoiseach's attention to the report from the Irish Youth Foundation issued today, which I am sure he has seen. This report finds that young people in disadvantaged communities are those most disproportionately affected by the pandemic. This will not come as a surprise to many of us. The report talks about poor mental health as a consequence of the pandemic. We need a youth trauma task force to deal with the wave of mental health issues and problems which have been exacerbated by this pandemic, particularly among young people and disadvantaged communities. Would the Taoiseach's Department be willing to champion this proposal, which is desperately needed?

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will raise two key issues with the Taoiseach. My colleague, Senator Bacik, has introduced a Bill in the Seanad to provide for paid reproductive leave. This would provide for up to 20 days of paid leave for early miscarriage and ten days for those availing of IVF treatment and fertility programmes. Will the Taoiseach confirm that this Government will support this Bill, address this issue or work with us to deal with it? Many of the Taoiseach's colleagues have come out in support of the Bill, which they feel is an excellent initiative. New Zealand has successfully introduced such provisions. We would appreciate the Taoiseach's support.

Will the Taoiseach confirm that his Government will bring forward proposals for statutory sick pay this year? From the Tánaiste's comments in particular, it sounds like we are always nearly there but the announcement never quite comes. Is it being held up because of lobbying? It has been nine months since the Labour Party published its Bill. We hope that we are coming to the tail end of the pandemic but this provision is still not in place. We were originally told that the Government's plans would be announced in March. There was then a delay. We have delayed our Bill deliberately because the Taoiseach said in all sincerity that he was going to address the matter. That was postponed again and the Taoiseach said the announcement would come in May. The Tánaiste said yesterday that he would bring a memo to Cabinet in June and wants to have the provisions in place by the end of the year. It does not sound like this issue is being treated with great urgency. Will the Taoiseach confirm his Government's stance on both of these issues, namely, Senator Bacik's Bill relating to miscarriage and IVF and the matter of statutory sick pay?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In asking a previous question, I told the Taoiseach that the design of the new national childcare scheme is jeopardising early education opportunities for

some of the most deprived and vulnerable children in the north inner city. I am sure this situation is mirrored across the State. The Taoiseach responded to me by listing investments made in education and childcare generally in the north inner city. In case he harbours the delusion that there has been deep investment in early education or, in fact, in any education in our inner cities, I will tell him that he is wrong.

4 o'clock

There is much more that needs to be done. On the immediate issue, I repeat, up to 80% of children attending specific early learning settings in the inner city are children who are deeply disadvantaged. The Government's new scheme threatens the capacity of those services to survive. I would like to hear a more solid commitment from the Taoiseach than that he will engage with the Minister and the Department because the providers have been doing that for months. I would like a commitment from the Taoiseach that these children, the most disadvantaged children in the community, will not be further disadvantaged and find themselves in a position of having no childcare provider to go to. That is what they are facing into.

Deputy Mick Barry: Some employers are using the pandemic to launch a one-sided class war against their workforce. One such employer is Aer Lingus. It has given its workers a deadline of today to respond to proposals which include, a five-year pay freeze, pay cuts, lower starting rates for new staff, cuts to duty allowances, cuts to sick pay arrangements and more. For those who are interested in knowing what more is involved I have posted the details on my Twitter account. These proposals are shocking. They are unacceptable and they would set a terrible precedent for trade unionists throughout the country and beyond. I sincerely hope the workers resist them. I want to know what the Government, which provides Aer Lingus with State support through the EWSS, intends to do to protect these workers and to prevent assaults of this type on living standards.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Last week, I questioned the Tánaiste about the double rent hike facing renters this July as landlords attempt to impose two year's worth of rent increases in one fell swoop, which is allowed under the legislation introduced by the Government. The Tánaiste seemed genuinely surprised and unaware that this was possible and he said that it was not the Government's intention to allow for such percentage increases in rent. Will the Taoiseach and the Government bring forth this month the emergency legislation needed to stop this happening? For the average renter in Dublin, an 8% rent increase would be an increase of €140 per month, an incredible amount of money that is unaffordable for many, especially considering the cuts coming down the line in terms of the PUP. We should be extending the rent freeze. We should be taking action to bring rents down. At the very least, we need emergency legislation to stop this double rent hike happening. If the Government refuses to do that, People Before Profit will bring forward legislation and we will make sure that it is a major issue in the by-election in Dublin Bay South. Which will it be, Taoiseach? Will the Government bring forward the legislation that is needed or will it again abandon renters to landlords?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Gannon raised the issue of mental health and wellbeing. I agree with the points he made. We discussed this earlier in the House. Again, it is a key issue, particularly in terms of young people. Any supports we can give, we will give. We will work with the Deputy and others in respect of that particular issue.

Deputy Kelly raised a number of issues. We will work with the Deputy's party in respect of the Organisation of Working Time (Reproductive Health Related Leave) Bill 2021 in relation

to supporting those who have gone through the trauma of miscarriage. On statutory sick pay, the Government is examining the issue and is positively disposed to such a scheme. Work is ongoing in that regard. This question was on the social dialogue and on the leave programme. We have made considerable progress on a number of fronts. This is an issue on which we want to make progress. We have work to do in regard to the living wage as well, which is provided for within the programme for Government and also in terms of other initiatives that we can take and lessons that we can learn from the pandemic in regard to sick pay, illness benefit more generally and supporting workers more broadly into the future.

On the new national childcare scheme, I reiterate what I said earlier, that is, significant and substantial resources have been provided to childcare providers during the pandemic and that will continue. Our aim is to provide for children in very disadvantaged settings and to provide good quality childcare for children in those environments. That has been the commitment of the Minister and of the Government during the Covid-19 pandemic. As we emerge from Covid-19 we want to establish a strong, supportive situation for childcare and for the early years sector. The most important years in the development of any child are the formative development years when children learn an awful lot that is key to their development. We will work on that.

On the wider issue of the EWSS and the supports we provide, from which companies like Aer Lingus have benefited significantly, last week we had a number of Deputies in the House saying that the Government was not providing supports to aviation or to the airlines. The reality, of course, is that through EWSS and other supports Government has provided substantial supports to employers to keep employees working and to keep their companies viable so that when the reopening and the restart happen they will be in a position to retain that employment and to grow the numbers working in those companies into the future. That is the *raison d'être* of the supports that we have introduced for businesses. Up to 315,000 workers are currently being supported by EWSS. Many more have been supported over the last two years, but currently the number of workers being supported is 315,000. More workers are being supported through the Covid restrictions support scheme and other schemes introduced by Government. We will continue to do that.

With respect to proposals from a particular private sector company, the Government has made clear to the companies it supports that it expects all agreements to be honoured. There are industrial relations mechanisms in place to facilitate resolution of any issues that employees might have with their companies. We have made a number of things clear to companies in that respect. In terms of aviation, we want connectivity, including regional connectivity. We want flights operating again from Shannon Airport. We want to see the return of early flights to London, transatlantic flights and flights from Cork. We believe in strong regional growth and development and we have made that clear to Aer Lingus and to the airlines, both in terms of employment creation and FDI. Under the urban regeneration development funding, the Government provided over €1.2 billion for locations across the length and breadth of the country to build up the regional cities and to build up towns. We will continue to do that. There has to be reciprocation from companies given the nature of State support in terms of maintaining good pay and conditions for workers and the broader economic goals and objectives of Government in respect of a balanced economic development across the regions. We have made that clear in any engagement we have had with companies, not just in aviation, but in other sectors as well.

The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is examining the situation with regard to the possibility of landlords doubling up in respect of rent increases, which we do not want to see happening. As we speak, that situation is being actively

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considered by the Minister. We will do what we can to support tenants through the legislation already enacted to protect people from eviction, to protect tenants in terms of security of tenure, to build more houses and make them available for people across the length and breadth of the country, to make sure that councils can get housing projects through planning and passed so that the housing can be built because there has been too much delay in some councils and, in my view, too much negativity and too many projects gathering dust for far too long.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are only four minutes remaining, which leaves little time for the next group of questions. If Members are in agreement, we will move on to the next business. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Situation in Belarus: Motion

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

affirms Ireland's solidarity with the Belarusian people in their peaceful defence of democratic principles and fundamental human rights;

rejects the democratic legitimacy of Alexander Lukashenko following the fraudulent 9th August, 2020, Presidential Election that was neither free nor fair;

condemns the violence and repression perpetrated by the Lukashenko regime in the run up to, and in the aftermath of, that election, including its actions to silence the opposition, civil society and independent media through mass arrests, heavy criminal penalties, internet shutdowns and restrictions on media freedoms;

further condemns the recent coercive forced landing by the Belarusian authorities of a Ryanair aircraft, that was flying between European Union (EU) capitals, which endangered the lives of the passengers and crew and showed a flagrant disregard for international law;

calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Roman Protasevich, Sofia Sapega and all those unjustly detained in Belarus;

welcomes the initiation of an investigation by the International Civil Aviation Organisation and calls on the Belarusian authorities to fully cooperate with that investigation;

further welcomes the firm response of the European Council during their meeting on 24th May, and affirms Ireland's continued support for coordinated EU measures;

notes:

- the genuinely spontaneous and peaceful nature of the protest movement in Belarus following the illegitimate August 2020 Presidential election;

- the lack of action by the Belarusian authorities to adequately investigate allegations of human rights violations, such as rape, electrocution and other forms of torture;

- the strong concerns of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of

human rights defenders regarding the persecution of women human rights defenders and the effective criminalisation of human rights work;

- Ireland's commitment to keeping the situation in Belarus high on the international agenda, including at the United Nations Human Rights Council and at meetings of United Nations Security Council members; and

- Ireland's vocal and steadfast support for the Belarusian people and Belarusian civil society, including through support for projects that seek to protect human rights and media freedoms; and

urges the Belarusian authorities to:

- implement the recommendations of the November 2020 report of Professor Wolfgang Benedek arising from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Moscow Mechanism;

- engage with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus and grant her access to the country in her official capacity;

- fully engage with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in her investigation into the over two thousand reports of human rights violations, including torture, ill-treatment and physical and sexual abuse of detainees;

- end the impunity with which Belarusian security forces are permitted to act and to permit independent and transparent investigations into the deaths in custody of Raman Bandarenka and Vitold Ashurak; and

- engage in a meaningful and inclusive national dialogue with the political opposition and civil society, with a view to making needed reforms in advance of fresh elections that are free, fair and independently monitored.

I hope this motion will receive all-party support in the House. It is brought forward following the disturbing escalation in the lengths the Belarusian authorities are willing to go to repress those critical of Alexander Lukashenko's leadership. By coercively forcing a Ryanair aircraft to divert to Minsk under false pretences, they displayed a willingness to endanger the lives of passengers to detain someone whose views the regime does not like.

Ireland reacted to this incident swiftly and firmly. At a meeting of EU leaders last week, the Taoiseach clearly communicated Ireland's view that a strong EU response was needed. That response is now being delivered. EU airlines have been asked to avoid Belarusian airspace, work has commenced on banning Belarusian airlines from EU airspace and actions are being taken to impose sanctions on those responsible for this dangerous incident. Our concern must be for the protection of our citizens and the safety of international aviation.

Alexander Lukashenko holds no democratic legitimacy. The Belarusian people have made that clear through their ten months of protests since the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020. Ireland and the EU have rejected the result of that election and Mr. Lukashenko's secretive so-called inauguration. We have repeatedly called on the Belarusian authorities to engage in a meaningful national dialogue with the political opposition and civil society, make needed reforms to the electoral process, and hold fresh elections that are free, fair and independently monitored.

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Mr. Lukashenko maintains de facto control by ruling through fear. Since coming to power in 1994, he has sought to deny the Belarusian people free choice in their political representation. No election in Belarus since that time has been free or fair. Frustrated by his leadership, the Belarusian people very clearly expressed their desire for change in the run-up to the August 2020 presidential election. In advance of that vote, Mr. Lukashenko imprisoned his main political challengers and cracked down on protesters and civil society. However, he underestimated the strength of the desire for democratic change among the Belarusian people. In doing so, he clearly demonstrated his inability to recognise the winds of change.

He dismissed the challenge posed by the courageous women who took charge of the democratic movement. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veronika Tsepkalo and Maria Kalesnikava inspired a mass democratic movement both at home and abroad among the Belarusian diaspora. Ms Tsikhanouskaya, in particular, led this movement despite the imprisonment of her husband and threats from the authorities to take her children away. Notwithstanding the obvious popularity of her campaign, the Central Election Commission was complicit in delivering a falsified election result that gave Alexander Lukashenko roughly 80% of the vote. International monitors were not given sufficient time to send an election observation mission. Due to widespread irregularities in the voting process, including ballot rigging, we will never know the true result of the election.

Hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters took to the streets immediately following the result. Rather than engage with the protesters, Mr. Lukashenko chose to deploy massive state violence against them. Ireland and the EU strongly condemned this violence. We were appalled by the mass arbitrary detentions, including of children, unexplained disappearances and loss of life, reports of torture, curtailments on fundamental freedoms, Internet shutdowns and much more besides. Ireland reacted to these events promptly and publicly. At meetings of the UN Security Council and the Human Rights Council, I made clear Ireland's deep concerns regarding the repression of the Belarusian people. Ireland has been vocal in calling for an end to the violence and repression and we have repeatedly called for the immediate and unconditional release of all those unjustly detained, including hundreds of political prisoners. I commend the many Oireachtas Members and Irish MEPs who have highlighted the cases of persons imprisoned for their political views. I share their concern for the welfare of those detained.

Mr. Lukashenko has all but criminalised freedom of expression in his country. Even the most trivial forms of dissent carry heavy costs and lengthy sentences. The Belarusian Association of Journalists recorded 477 detentions of journalists and media workers in 2020 alone. There has been an increase in restrictions on media outlets over recent months, including the blocking of access to independent news websites. Ireland has strongly condemned the repression of independent media and attacks on journalists, bloggers and media workers. They play a critical role in documenting human rights violations and challenging disinformation and state propaganda. Promoting and defending the right to freedom of expression, media freedom and the safety of journalists is at the core of UNESCO's mandate. Ireland supports the EU's call for UNESCO to react to the deteriorating situation. At the UN, Ireland has supported joint statements expressing deep concerns regarding the use of Internet shutdowns and the situation faced by journalists and media workers in Belarus. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, also conveyed Ireland's views during a meeting of UN Security Council members in January. Ireland is fully committed to the protection and promotion of the freedom of expression.

In that connection, I wish to express my deep concern for the welfare of Roman Protasevich. The coercive forced landing of a Ryanair aircraft travelling between EU capitals to detain Mr.

Protasevich was utterly unacceptable and my Department has made our strong views known to the Belarusian Embassy in London. Mr. Protasevich now faces a severe penalty solely for expressing views the Lukashenko regime does not like. His companion, Sofia Sapega, was also detained simply for her association with him. I reiterate Ireland's call for their immediate and unconditional release.

We reject the transparently false narrative of the Belarusian authorities regarding the now widely discredited bomb threat on board the Ryanair aircraft. Last week, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, called for an urgent investigation into the incident by the International Civil Aviation Organisation, ICAO. I welcome its agreement to undertake such an investigation. It is important that those responsible for this outrageous attack on EU aviation security be held to account.

The Belarusian people have endured a long term of repression under the leadership of Alexander Lukashenko. Ireland shares the concerns of UN rapporteurs. There have been 2,000 reports of human rights violations, including allegations of torture involving rape and electrocution, women human rights defenders have been persecuted and human rights work has been effectively criminalised. We regret that the Belarusian authorities continue to deny the special rapporteur for human rights in Belarus access to the country in her official capacity. This is essential to establishing the facts on the ground. Ireland will continue to support her mandate until she has had the opportunity to complete her work fully.

We have all seen the harrowing images of injuries sustained by those who were unjustly detained in the aftermath of the election. We have seen security forces beat peaceful protesters in broad daylight. Tragically, we have also witnessed a number of deaths in custody, including a children's art teacher and, most recently, other activists. Yet we have not seen investigations into these abuses by Belarusian authorities. One of the guiding principles of Ireland's tenure at the UN Security Council is ensuring accountability. We are committed to promoting the rule of law and the upholding of human rights. Central to this commitment is the fight against impunity. It is clear that impunity breeds violence. That is why Ireland and the EU have repeatedly called for transparent and independent investigations. To that end, Ireland played a constructive role in extending the mandate of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate human rights violations in Belarus, including possible gender dimensions. The High Commissioner has begun the work of operationalising that mandate by hiring a team of international human rights experts. The NGO-led International Accountability Platform for Belarus and investigations conducted in EU member states under the principle of universal jurisdiction will complement the work of the high commissioner's team. Ireland fully supports all these efforts to ensure that those responsible for human rights violations are made accountable for their actions.

Ireland also supports the recommendations of the OSCE's expert investigator, Professor Wolfgang Benedek, in his Moscow mechanism report. This report found human rights violations to be massive, systematic and proven beyond any doubt. The detailed recommendations in his report establish actionable steps to bring Belarus into line with its OSCE and international commitments and obligations. I again urge the Belarusian authorities to implement those recommendations promptly.

Sanctions are also important for international accountability. In Belarus, 88 individuals and seven commercial entities have been sanctioned. Following the recent Ryanair incident, it is clear we need to go further. The EU will bring additional sanctions against those responsible

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for what has happened and is actively considering what form additional economic sanctions may take. Ireland welcomes the EU's robust response and that of our like-minded international partners. Lukashenko assumed he could silence opposition and wait out international concern as he has done in the past. The EU has been clear, however, that there cannot be a return to business as usual under his leadership. His fear of democracy and the political will of the Belarusian people are very clear now. He has now delayed national local elections until 2023 and has made no meaningful attempt to reach out to the opposition or civil society. Rather than make good on his promise of constitutional change as a precursor of his retirement, it seems he has focused on ensuring his family's succession in the event of his death. The rhetoric and actions emerging from Belarus have threatened the peace and security of the European neighbourhood. Belarusians deserve to have their democratic voice heard in free and fair elections, and Ireland will remain steadfast in calling for those elections and in supporting actions to bring accountability to those who have deprived the Belarusian people of their rights.

I commend this broad motion to the House and, as I said at the start, I hope it will get universal support.

Deputy John Brady: I add my support and the support of my party, Sinn Féin, to the motion. I can only condemn in the strongest terms the act of international piracy committed by Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. The hijacking of a civilian aircraft to facilitate the arrest of a journalist is an absolute disgrace. I am glad that the international community is prepared to act to ensure that this act will not go unpunished.

It may be argued that when the Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko, gave the order to hijack this plane he was targeting not simply a journalist and the journalist's girlfriend but also, in effect, the entire Belarusian opposition. We have long associated performative violence with the counter-insurgency tactics of colonial powers from the 19th century onwards, be they French, British, Israeli or whatever else. The impact of performative acts of violence is well known. Most usually it is intended as a moral lesson to be visited upon the watching audience as much as the unfortunate victims. It is a tried-and-tested method of colonial policing, the practice of which has been taken up by authoritarian regimes globally. It is the practice of striking terror in the hearts and fear in the minds of men and women who would dare to lend their support to the opponents of an authoritarian regime. In the hijacking of the Ryanair plane, Alexander Lukashenko was attempting to send a message to all who oppose his government that there is no place safe from his reach. It was a blatant act of aggression intended to silence legitimate dissent to the undemocratic actions of the Lukashenko government. It was a message intended to convey the strength, dominance and reach of Lukashenko.

In that regard, I have been struck, from the commentary I have witnessed since the hijacking took place, by the impact the event has had on members of the Belarusian diaspora, including some who reside in this State, and this is totally unacceptable. The Irish Government, along with its EU counterparts, needs to offer reassurance to the members of the Belarusian diaspora who feel threatened by the acts of President Lukashenko. We have a duty to protect the physical and emotional security of all on this island, particularly those who would be threatened by this act of international aggression. A failure to do so would act as a measure of success for President Lukashenko and his intention of silencing the democratic opposition of the Belarusian people. Lukashenko has attempted to increase pressure on the Belarusian opposition living abroad through the targeting of family members at home in Belarus. This includes an incident which saw the detention of the grandparents and the sister's husband of a foreign-based Belarusian journalist. International measures designed to curtail Lukashenko need to be extended to

offer protection to the families of his opponents who remain within his reach.

I welcome the fact that the EU was able to reach a unanimous decision on the important issue of voting to put in place sanctions against the Lukashenko government. I wish to express my disappointment, however, that some eastern European members of the EU that have led out on the calls for action against the Belarusian government, which I repeat I and my colleagues in Sinn Féin support, have singularly failed to apply the same rigorous criteria to the human rights abuses of other administrations in other parts of the world. All our actions and decisions and our entire outlook, both here in the Dáil and in the EU, must be predicated on the rule of international law. When nation states are found guilty of breaking international law, they must know they will face consequences commensurate with their crimes without fear or favour. International law is not a pick-and-mix; it must be applied rigorously and fairly.

It is disturbing that a number of states can refuse to support the application of the rule of international law against Israel for its flagrant abuses of international law and persecution of the Palestinian people. We can speculate as to what their reasons are. It is correct that the EU will vote to impose sanctions against Belarus, but it is shameful that the EU persists in its refusal to impose sanctions against another state that continues to act in violation of international law, one that stands accused of the crime of apartheid and, in recent weeks, has been responsible for the murder of hundreds of civilians, including dozens of children. The Dáil has shown that it is prepared to stand against this oppression, but our Government must take up the mantle set before it by the Irish people and demand at EU level an equivalence under international law for all states guilty of human rights abuses. While I agree with everything the Minister said, I agree with one part in particular, namely, that impunity breeds violence. A perceived impunity has allowed Israel to perpetrate grave human rights abuses. As a country, we must stand up for the rule of law internationally. It is incumbent on us to take a lead on measures, not just against Belarus for breaching international law, but against all countries that do so, and that must include Israel.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am pleased to support the motion. What happened last month was like something one would see in a Netflix movie - a Ryanair aeroplane taking off from one European capital, heading north towards another European capital, and being subjected to an effective hijacking by a leader styling himself on a dictator. In reality, it was the news. A plane full of Europeans and Americans flying from Athens in Greece to Vilnius in Lithuania got MiGed to Minsk and Lukashenko and his onboard gang of KGB thugs got their priority passenger - a young journalist who was gathering intelligence and exposing corruption, tyranny and brutality in Belarus - all on the pretext of a threat from Hamas when what was happening in Gaza was utterly disgusting. The screenwriters and plotters had all their political bases covered. Politically, it was brazen, reckless and audacious. No doubt, it has given ideas to those of a similar disposition or inclination.

All of us with children who are in their 20s feel the fear and distress of Mr. Roman Protasevich's parents and the sickening worry of his partner, Ms Sofia Sapega's family as they consider the immunity of impunity and *vice versa* being established in that part of Europe. This did not just happen on our doorstep, but on one of our budget airlines, Ryanair. At 33,000 ft with a fighter jet escort and a state's lie about a terror threat on board, the people inside the aeroplane were trapped and vulnerable.

I have constituents from Belarus who now live in north Kildare. They are worried about their country and families and are anxious about Lukashenko's grip on their homeland. At the same time, they have fierce pride and fear for the Chernobyl child with the strong ties to Ro-

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screa, County Tipperary, Ms Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who has taken the place of her husband after the opposition leader and pro-democracy campaigner was jailed before the elections, joining more than 400 other political prisoners in a country that still has the death penalty and where political detainees are regularly tortured.

I welcome the swift and necessary international political moves against Belarus. Unfortunately, they stand in stark contrast to the international tardiness in similar necessary action against Israel for its breaking of international law in Palestine against the Palestinian people, including 66 dead Gazan children. I urge the international community to look at Belarus and Israel with the same political zeal. We cannot come down hard on those who break international law in one country while tiptoeing around those who break it in another. It is the law itself and the breaking of that law that matters, not who breaks it. It cannot be a case of all eyes on Lukashenko but a blind eye turned to Netanyahu. If it is, we are excusing and complicit in the breaking of international law. I urge the Minister to remember this.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I do not often agree with Michael O’Leary, but in anyone’s language, the action by the Belarusian Government last month was state-sponsored piracy. I send my solidarity to the people of Belarus, who are suffering under the Lukashenko regime. In particular, I send my solidarity to Mr. Protasevich and his girlfriend, Ms Sapega. It is clear that Mr. Protasevich’s arrest was the object of the exercise. It has been reported that there were several KGB agents on the flight.

I commend the work of Belarusian exiles in applying pressure to companies like Rolls-Royce and British American Tobacco, which are seen as supporters of the regime. They have also contacted holders of Belarusian bonds listed on the London Stock Exchange. No company with any regard for human rights should have any relationship whatsoever with Belarus.

We need a strong response from the EU. This is a serious issue that requires a serious response. Citizens of European countries were endangered by the actions of the Belarusian Government and there must be a commensurate response. Otherwise, it will set a dangerous precedent. Where is the UN on this matter? The UN needs fundamental reform. It is not acceptable that Israel has acted with impunity or for Belarus to do the same.

Freedom of the press is an important part of democracy. It plays a vital role in informing citizens about public affairs and monitoring the actions of government at all levels. In a cynical move, a transcript broadcast by Belarusian television implied that the Ryanair crew had asked to land in Minsk, which was not the case. It is clear that Belarus has a severe democratic deficit. We owe it to the people of Belarus to stand up to this regime and to call its behaviour out for what it is.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: On behalf of the Labour Party, I support the motion, which is in the name of the committee, that I hope will be passed by all Members.

Belarus is not a nation that we have traditionally had extensive dealings with, but many of us have publicly supported the democratic rallies that followed last year’s patently fraudulent presidential election. We supported publicly and in this House the sanctions taken by the EU against the Lukashenko regime’s violent action against peaceful demonstrators. What is probably the most oppressive regime in continental Europe is a cause of shame for us all.

The forced landing of a Ryanair flight between two EU capitals and the arrest of two of its passengers - Mr. Protasevich, a democracy campaigner and journalist, and his partner, Ms

Sapega - dramatically refocused our attention. Apart from a general level of shock at such an outrageous act of state-sponsored hijacking of a European airline in European airspace, it is clear that the objective of this action was not only to remove a journalist and his travel companion, but to terrorise any citizen who is critical of Lukashenko and his oppressive regime. The Belarusian authorities subsequently released two videos, one of Mr. Protasevich and the other of Ms Sapega, each allegedly confessing to crimes of organising illegal demonstrations against the regime or other criminal actions. Lukashenko has been in power for 26 years. He is an authoritarian ruler who, before last year's elections, had one eye on what Russia was doing in the annexation of parts of Ukraine and made some outreach to the European Union. Now, he plainly believes that he can take this action without significant consequences. Following last year's fraudulent elections, the European Union declared those elections to be just that. Lukashenko dismissed the sanctions that were imposed and obviously came to the conclusion that the EU itself, in response to his actions, was largely toothless. He was emboldened, therefore, to feel that he could act to intercept a flight of EU citizens between Athens and Vilnius and to consider that that was fair game for him.

The motion before the House urges the European Union, Council and Commission to continue to monitor the situation. Most people in this House strongly feel that we need to do much more than that. A clearly petrified journalist was bundled off an internal European Union flight. He and all of the passengers who boarded that plane in Athens were entitled to feel safe and that they would not be intercepted by a foreign nation and that the authority of the European Union itself would protect them. I welcome the actions taken to date and the actions of our own Government in convening a series of meetings. We must be prepared to do more.

Specifically, we must harness whatever international pressure is necessary to free Roman Protasevich and the Sofia Sapega. Those people are among hundreds of political prisoners, many of whom have been tortured, in Lukashenko's Belarus. They entrusted their safety to the European Union. They boarded a flight in a European capital *en route* to another in a European-registered aeroplane. We must mount whatever diplomatic and economic pressure is required until they are both freed.

We also need to know if Russia was involved in any way in this illegal hijacking. As well as expressing the outrage of the Irish Government and people to the Belarus Embassy in London, about which he told the House, I ask the Minister whether questions were also put to the Russian Ambassador here. If so, what response was received?

We have seen in recent times a number of horrendous actions by state agents hijacking citizens who expressed opposition to their regimes. We saw the brutal murder of an opponent of the Saudi leadership in a consulate building in Turkey. This week we also saw the taking of a critic of the Turkish Government itself from the streets of Kenya. These are outrageous acts and we need to act as an international community to ensure that they do not reoccur.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am moving back to the Government slot. I call Deputy Haughey.

Deputy Seán Haughey: The state-sponsored hijacking of a civilian aircraft, Ryanair flight FR4978, travelling from Athens to Lithuania on Sunday last, 23 May, was outrageous. As we know, the plane was forced to land in Minsk under false pretences. This has been correctly described as state-sponsored piracy. The dispatch of a Belarusian fighter jet to the scene reinforces this view. In this case, we had EU citizens travelling between two EU states on board

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an EU-registered airline. Belarusian journalist and opposition activist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend were taken off the plane, arrested and put into detention. They have since been coerced into confessing to participation in illegal demonstrations. These confessions have been made public and are yet another case of fundamental human rights being breached. These series of events represent a serious threat to the security of EU citizens in so many ways and are a wake-up call for the EU and for all who believe in democracy.

How has the EU reacted to these events? As it happens, a meeting of the European Council was scheduled at the same time as this saga was unfolding. This was certainly a test of the resolve of the European Union. President Alexander Lukashenko is reported as saying that EU politicians do not have balls. In response, the EU strongly condemned the hijacking. It imposed sanctions on Belarus after the presidential elections last year and new sanctions have now been imposed on individuals, high-level officials, and businesses in Belarus that are supportive of the regime. That is the right approach.

In addition, EU airlines were advised not to fly over Belarus and a ban was imposed on Belarusian airlines flying into EU airspace. Again, that was right thing to do.

Separately, the International Transport Forum has requested that an official investigation be carried out by the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization and I know that the Minister, Deputy Ryan, was very supportive of that.

The primary demand at this stage must be for Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend to be released immediately. The United States will also join the EU in imposing sanctions on Belarus and this is also to be welcomed.

What is the situation generally in Belarus at this time? By any standards, Alexander Lukashenko is an authoritarian ruler presiding over a dangerous regime. The election committee in Belarus gave Lukashenko 80% of the vote in the presidential election last year, when independent observers estimate that the actual vote that he got was nearer 25% to 30%. The election was therefore rigged. Subsequently, protests were brutally suppressed. Some 35,000 people were arrested. Prisoners were beaten, tortured and even raped in prison. Some candidates were imprisoned while others fled the country. Ireland must continue to raise its concerns at the EU and the UN about these ongoing human rights abuses in Belarus.

The daily harassment and intimidation of civil society, journalists and the independent media with unjust detentions and attempts to criminalise human rights are commonplace. We should also ensure that this is on the top of the agenda of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. These practices on the doorstep of the EU are totally unacceptable and must be called out and highlighted by Ireland at every available opportunity.

As regards the situation generally in Belarus, the EU rightly took a strong stand following the presidential election last year. Belarus is bordered by Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the Ukraine. Given that it is generally supported by Russia, Belarus is a threat to international security. The EU, as a champion of democratic values, has also offered a €3 billion package to Belarus if it transitions to democracy. Again, this proposed practical assistance is the right thing to do. The EU, including Ireland, is not neutral when it comes to the rule of law and the protection of freedom and democracy. We must, therefore, keep Belarus high on the international agenda. I met some Belarusians outside of Leinster House a short time ago and their fear is that their country will fall down the political agenda in a couple of weeks' time.

I want to tell the House about Vitold Ashurak who died in a Belarusian prison last month on 21 May. He was a political prisoner, an opposition activist sentenced last year at a closed trial to five years for public order offences. Aged 50, he was also an environmentalist. According to official reports, he died of cardiac failure. When his body was returned to his family, however, his head was entirely covered with bandages. The circumstances of his death are, to say the least, very suspicious and must be thoroughly and independently investigated but, unfortunately, I doubt very much that will be facilitated. I had adopted Vitold Ashurak as a political prisoner at the request of an NGO known as Libereco. Other Deputies, Senators and Irish MEPs have also adopted political prisoners in Belarus, and I encourage more to do so. Ireland and the EU must press home strongly the demand for the immediate release of all political prisoners currently in Belarusian prisons. Their only crime was standing up for democracy and fundamental human rights in their country.

Of course, the elephant in the room in this debate is Russia. Russia must be clearly seen as a threat to our security at this time and it has form in this regard. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, while in 2014, it invaded Crimea in the Ukraine. It has recently announced plans to beef up its military operations in its western region. The opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, was poisoned and imprisoned.

It is clear Russia engages in cyberwarfare throughout the globe. Incidentally, the Russian ambassador to Ireland was quoted in a Sunday newspaper as stating that Russia had no links to the hackers of the HSE ICT system. The least Russia can do is to ensure the criminals in its country are prevented from engaging in this activity. In 2018, there was the novichok nerve agent attack in Salisbury, England. Election interference and cyberespionage by Russia is well-documented and its meddling in the 2020 US presidential election is also no secret. In 2014, Russian military intelligence was linked to a blast at a warehouse containing 58 tonnes of ammunition in the Czech Republic.

As regards the recent aeroplane hijacking, the Ryanair boss, Michael O'Leary, has stated that KGB agents were on board. Russia retaliated in respect of the EU flight ban by banning flights into Moscow, and within days, President Lukashenko was very publicly photographed with Vladimir Putin. It has been reported that Russia will soon send Belarus the next \$500 million tranche of the \$1.5 billion in agreed loans.

We can draw our own conclusions from all of this. It is clear that Russia wants to present itself as a major global power once again and its aim is to destabilise the EU. We need to wise up to all this. From what I can see, the US intends to do so in any event. The US President, Joe Biden, has stated that he will raise abuses of human rights with President Putin when he meets him in Geneva this month. President Biden has spoken about democracy being under threat in the US and globally, and again we all need to appreciate this.

This brings me to the issue of growing authoritarianism throughout the globe, and in particular within the EU. Of course, I have Hungary and Poland in mind in this context. Gradually, democratic norms are being eroded in some EU states and that is a worry. Let us hope this is just a temporary phenomenon. Press freedom, an independent judiciary, academic freedom, tolerance of minorities, checks and balances and the right to protest are all basic democratic norms, yet the EU does not seem to have the tools for monitoring and sanctioning non-compliance. While there are Article 7 and other mechanisms, there is a weakness as regards qualified majority voting when it comes to European Council meetings for some reason, to take one example. The EU is divided between those who wish to punish offenders and those who think

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they should be encouraged to stay within the tent, so to speak. On the EU recovery fund being contingent on rule of law adherence, for example, a fudge was eventually agreed, and it remains to be seen what will happen in the end in that regard.

Democracy is a fragile form of government and it is under threat from creeping authoritarianism. Democracies do not automatically self-renew. We must be conscious of this before it is too late and we cannot take our democracy for granted. I will support the motion. As other Deputies said, perhaps we should do a bit more than what is contained therein, but this debate is most welcome and timely.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: An aeroplane travelling between Athens and Vilnius was diverted with the threat of a bomb, with a MiG-29 becoming part of the operation and with the return of terminology related to the KGB. It is like something out of a bad film. It is “Die Hard” without John McClane. The problem is there was no hero and a crime was without doubt committed. It was international piracy and state-sponsored hijacking. There have been many headlines in recent years that we would not have anticipated, but we would never have predicted this.

I assume that on some level, people in Belarus would say, “No shock here”. We are talking about Alexander Lukashenko. To put it mildly, we look at that state and know that “democratic deficit” is the nicest way one could talk about it. There have been significant human rights abuses and considerable knocks to democracy, and the people who live there do so under severe pressure. Moreover, this is big-boy politics, big-boy play. This is an attempt to show how powerful Lukashenko is. This is a lesson to his enemies, at home and abroad, that he can do business and get them anywhere. We really need to take action.

I welcome what we are doing in this debate, with full support in the House for the motion, and what the EU has done, managing to get unanimity and sanctions. I also welcome the fact that the US is going to follow through with sanctions, because that is all very necessary. This crime was committed so that Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, could be detained. It is difficult to believe this happened in the modern world, but sometimes people get into positions of power and do not see any restraints or controls. We can get a result only through sanctions, putting pressure on them and ensuring that the world knows and that they are made to feel that theirs is a pariah state. That is what needs to happen here. We need to follow through on this and that is necessary.

We know there are internal issues in the EU. Other Deputies have spoken about its rule of law difficulties, particularly in regard to Hungary and Poland, and they need to be dealt with. The wider issue of Catalonian elected representatives facing sanctions they should not face is utterly wrong as well. Furthermore, it would be remiss of me not to mention the historic motion that my colleague, Deputy Brady, recently tabled. We secured agreement to call out the reality of the Israeli annexation and stealing of Palestinian lands. It was brilliant, effective and necessary that we got that work done in the House last week, but that will matter only if we bring it to another place, namely, back to the EU and the international community.

5 o'clock

It should be the case that we stand up for rights, human rights and for people’s rights across the world and ensure international criminality, human rights abuses and slaughter is called out. We should demand international law and deal with international criminals. We support full

sanctions in relation to this utterly international criminal act by the Lukashenko regime. However, we also call for others to be dealt with in the same way. Whether that can be achieved throughout the European Union, I doubt it very much. Ireland, along with many other countries that are willing to sign up to the reality of breaches of international law by the Israelis, must put pressure on them and other rule breakers, other international criminals, and to demand the rights of people.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I never thought I would have to stand in our Parliament and describe a scene where Ryanair, an Irish airline, was effectively forced to perform a rendition flight between two European Union member countries, Greece and Lithuania. A rendition flight was performed on the order of the Belarusian, Alexander Lukashenko. It is an unprecedented outrage. I cannot begin to imagine the terror on that flight, the terror of EU citizens being told that a bomb had been placed onboard. As confusion reigned, a journalist became aware that the flight was being redirected, not to the closet airport in Lithuania, but to Belarus from where he had fled, having sought sanctuary in the European Union. I cannot imagine the terror experienced by the journalist at that moment or the further terror experienced by those onboard as a fighter plane appeared, under the auspices of giving guidance to the airliner.

It has been called international piracy and a state-sponsored hijacking. I would add that it was state-sponsored terrorism. Terrorism has many forms. One aspect is to send a message of terror not just to the victims, in this case the journalist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega, but to anyone who would oppose the rule of Alexander Lukashenko. There is another aspect. It was a hijacking, international piracy and state-sponsored terrorism, but it was also a kidnapping. The kidnapping part cannot be lost in this. The most important thing now is the safe return of Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega, who is a student. That is of paramount importance. In addition to welcoming this motion, I welcome the immediate statement from our Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, in the hours following it calling for their release. That cannot be lost in the outrage and shock of what happened.

Protasevich was dangerous to the Belarusian regime because of his reporting. He was dangerous because he reported on what was happening in Belarus. The media organisation for which Protasevich works has a telegram channel with more than 1.2 million subscribers, which is a notable figure. It is a huge audience in Belarus, that is, 1.2 million subscribing to Protasevich's telegram channel, considering it has a population of just 9.5 million people. It shows how desperate the depths are to which autocratic leaders will sink to in order to silence the free press. It underscores the importance of a free press in democratic societies.

It must be said that the EU has failed to act with sufficient strength against Lukashenko and, in particular, against his cronies. The sanctions introduced last year and in February have clearly been ineffective. They were ineffective because they did not target the correct people. It is welcome that the Minister spoke about further sanctions and suggested there would be discussions on what they would consist of. It is not unknown that Lukashenko surrounds himself with oligarchs who have made their vast fortunes from petrol and fertiliser. If the EU really wants to target Lukashenko and his allies, it should go after the petrol and fertiliser oligarchs. Sanction them and make them pariahs. Then we will see the rats scuttling from the ship of Lukashenko.

This is a genuine test of EU foreign policy. It is also a test of the EU's policy not just outside our borders, but within our borders. People like Lukashenko have been empowered by the fact that other regimes in the European Union have acted in a way that was detrimental to our values and to the rights of citizens in the European Union. If we are to truly confront Lukashenko, we

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must get the house of the European Union in order. It has been stated, and I will repeat it, that the rule of law should apply in all circumstances. Lukashenko cannot become a convenient enemy where we say he is terrible and cover our eyes to everything else. Every day in Hungary and Poland, for example, migrant and minority communities are persecuted. That must be confronted. We should not tolerate that and we should never equivocate when the Orbán Government and the Polish Government tries to suppress our values and tell us that we cannot include certain amendments to enhance women's rights and minorities. When Poland enacted LGBT safe zones, we should have been visceral in our response, called for sanctions and should have done anything we could have done to ensure it did not take place.

A point I made last week when this was discussed, and I will make it again today, is that Lukashenko behaved in a manner that was truly appalling in terms of attacking the free press. It is welcome that the Government was quick to bring this motion to the House and it is one which I will fully support, but we cannot cover our eyes to how slow we have been to respond to the situation in the Middle East, in particular Israel's conduct. Only a few weeks ago, Israel blew up a building that housed the offices of Al Jazeera and the Associated Press. That cannot be forgotten. If we are to stand in opposition to attacks on free press over the skies of Belarus, we must also stand in total opposition to it wherever it happens in the world. The Government of Netanyahu blew up a building that housed the offices of Al Jazeera and the Associated Press. I do not think we can ever unsee that. I support the Government motion today, but I ask that we are not blind to where these injustices and autocratic despots operate elsewhere.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this debate and, of course, I wholeheartedly support this extremely important motion. Before I talk to the topic at hand, I want to state that this motion replaced statements on the post-European Council on the schedule. I have asked my party's representative on the Business Committee that that be on a future schedule of the Dáil because it is a requirement under the Lisbon treaty, in terms of subsidiarity, that our national Parliament receives a report on the European Council. That is vitally important. While Belarus was front and centre of the Council, it was not the only issue and there was much more to discuss. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, focused on in detail.

I am grateful to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, for his detailed intervention and the strength of this motion. It really is very strong and important. I want to commend the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, on his tireless efforts on this issue. Throughout his time as the Minister of State, he has gone above and beyond in terms of phone calls, meetings and corraling support within European Union member states for what was an important decision by the European Council last week. I will not lie. I was sceptical that the response from the European Council might have been slightly disappointing, given the nature of other governments' approach to dealing with Belarus and Russia. To have unanimous support for what is easily the strongest set of sanctions on and condemnation of Belarus coming from the European Council is vitally important, and is a huge testament to the Taoiseach, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, and their tireless work with European colleagues. I am struck and disappointed that it has taken an act of international terrorism to unite the EU to do something genuinely forcible in relation to the situation in Belarus. The fact an Irish-owned airliner was forced to land in Belarus so Roman Protasevich could be dragged off the plane by KGB agents with his girlfriend and now languishes in a Belarusian jail potentially facing the death penalty is the most bizarre and scary situation. That is what it took for every one of the 27 member states of the European Union to finally stand up and offer genuine condemnation and sanction for the

totalitarian regime in Belarus which many of us have spoken about and raised via parliamentary questions and other post and pre-European Council statements in this Chamber for some time. It is nothing new. We are dealing with a brutal dictatorship that is a puppet of the Russian Government. We have to be firm, not just in this Parliament in the EU member state furthest from Belarus, but across the European Union.

Roman Protasevich is one of at least 421 political prisoners languishing in a Belarusian jail. I am fortunate, like many Members of this House, to have been asked by Libereco to adopt one political prisoner, Tatsiana Yakelchyk. She sits in a Belarusian prison since November. She was a 20-something-year-old student going about her business and concerned about the future of her country. She was arrested in the middle of the night and taken from her apartment. Her mobile phone, laptop and iPad were seized. Now she stands on trial in a collective trial. It is an absolute show trial and she will be found guilty. Lord knows what the regime will do to her and many others.

This has been going on for a long time and it is not good enough that we allow certain member states in the EU to block meaningful action. While the sanctions agreed by the European Council were extremely welcome and this motion put down by the Government is particularly welcome and strong, it is still not enough. We need to look at what other member states, former member states and non-member states of the European Union have done to provide a meaningful response to what is going on in Belarus and the Belarusian regime's attack on European sovereignty by forcing a European-owned and EU-registered airline travelling between two EU capital cities and full of EU citizens to be brought down in the manner it was, with a fighter plane and an illegal bomb threat.

We have to call for the EU to make a full audit of every business based in the EU, including Ireland, which has connections or is active in Belarus. Such an audit has been called for in the house in Westminster. We have to make it clear that doing business with the regime in Belarus is unacceptable. It cannot be stood for and we cannot allow the citizens of Belarus and of the EU to be put at risk for economic gain or otherwise. I call on the Minister to make that meaningful charge at the next meeting of the General Affairs Council.

I am struck by the universal tone of the debate here. I have not heard anyone say they will speak or vote against this motion, which is refreshing. Hopefully we will have more of this in the future. This is a pretty black and white issue. There is no grey area. We have to look at what we as a country can do meaningfully and how we can separate the authoritarian, totalitarian dictatorship, the regime and the cronies that surround President Lukashenko from the innocent people in Belarus who are suffering. Ireland has strong ties to Belarus. I am thinking of the work done over the years by Adi Roche and former Deputy Noel Coonan, who worked with children from Belarus affected by the fall-out from the Chernobyl disaster and other things to bring them to Ireland. We are struck by that tie and that relationship.

Something we can do is follow the example of what the UK did with Hong Kong. The Government can offer Irish visas immediately to any non-regime individual with the ability, opportunity and fortune to escape Belarus to allow them to work and travel and give them the security of being in the European Union. That is in our gift and is a sensible, generous measure. It is something we can do as a small EU member state to prove to the people of Belarus that we are on their side and that, when we criticise Belarus, we criticise the murderous regime of President Lukashenko, not the innocent people who have to live under that barbaric regime.

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Beyond that, we have to put pressure on the sporting organisations. There is not a rich history of ice hockey in this country but the fact the ice hockey under-19 championships are due to take place in Belarus in the coming months needs to be raised. We need to put pressure on EU member states with active ice hockey teams and ask them not to send those teams into this despotic regime to play and offer tacit agreement to what the regime is doing. It extends, more importantly, to football. There are many matches and tournaments in Belarus in the coming months and years. We need to take a stand as a Government and as the European Union.

We have to remember this regime denied Covid existed. It did not bring in any restrictions, forced its people to continue to work, allowed the Belarusian football league to continue as the virus ran like wildfire. What is behind this regime? Of serious concern to the entire European Union is the tacit and not-so-tacit support the regime receives from the Russian Federation. This is increasingly concerning and we have to be more outspoken in this Chamber and at a European Union level about the influence of the Russian Government directly and other sinister forces surrounding that Government, within the European Union and in our neighbourhood. They are supporting and propping up this regime.

At the weekend, we saw a lovely cuddle between Vladimir Putin and President Lukashenko. We saw the desperate dictator going to Moscow to receive affirmation and the guarantee of protection, funding and much else. It is pathetic, but that is what we face. We see the influence Russia has had in the affairs of Ukraine. We see the scandalous acts in the United Kingdom in the city of Salisbury and the brazen attempts by Russian elements, government or non-government, to influence elections across the European Union.

This State expelled Russian diplomats only a couple of years ago in response to the vicious state-sponsored murder in Salisbury. We need to be clear that within the European Union we will not tolerate these attempts to undermine our democratic institutions, our domestic security and the viability of this country to act without fear of influence and malevolent forces. Many regimes across the former Soviet bloc are prepared to tolerate and protect the sort of criminal gangs that were responsible for the vicious cyberattack that befell the HSE in recent weeks.

We are not talking about the situation in Belarus in isolation. We are talking about the geopolitical stability of the entire region and the need for Ireland as a member of the European Union and the UN Security Council not just to put down a motion like this, though it is extremely welcome, and have a selection of strong speeches, but also to play our part on the global stage continuously. The 400-odd prisoners in Belarusian jails will still be there in a couple of weeks' time and the people who live in Belarus will still be suffering. We cannot let this debate be a one-time effort.

I appeal to the Minister to make sure that this motion is binding and lasting and that everything done at an EU level by any Minister of this Government continues to push the case for the ordinary people of Belarus and underlines the concern all of us have for security and stability across the European Union and how that is reflected by the dictatorship in Belarus.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Tá mé ag roinnt mo chuid ama le mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Andrews. Ireland was drawn into what happened in Belarus by the nature of the arrest of Roman Protasevich. The fact that a Ryanair aeroplane - and therefore, in many senses, an Irish aeroplane - was forced into an emergency landing, which brought increased dangers for all the 130 passengers on board, made the Government's intervention expected and necessary. The Government has been strong on this, demanding answers from the Belarusian Government

in relation to this emergency landing. There has been clear shock from the Irish people that this has happened and that one of our aeroplanes was forced into an emergency landing. The answer that has been received so far that there were fears there was a bomb on board the same aeroplane that carried Roman Protasevich certainly seems a lot more than a coincidence. The concern internationally regarding freedom of the press has been quite resounding and the action by the EU, through the imposition of sanctions, has been very swift. It is deeply unfortunate that the same swift action in terms of the immediate imposition of sanctions with regard to the freedom of the press was not taken by the EU in the targeting of media outlets by the Israeli air force in Gaza two weeks ago. We must be clear that we tolerate no attacks on the media, no matter where they are. Outrage and swift action should not simply be confined to attacks on the media. The killing of civilians, including many children, in Gaza should have been sufficient reason for the international community to act swiftly on Israel's apartheid regime.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs met recently with the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, about the situation in Belarus. I note that both were unequivocal in their outrage regarding same. While the US does not have a direct say about what will happen to Roman Protasevich, it does have a direct say on another journalist who is being held captive, namely, Julian Assange. He is someone I have raised in this Chamber on several occasions. I hope the Minister used this opportunity to raise his case and call for his immediate release, as it would be utterly hypocritical not to do so when raising the case of another journalist, Roman Protasevich. Julian Assange is facing charges for spreading information in a normal journalistic way and the silence on this from the international community has been deafening, as has been the silence of the very newspapers that published the information he gathered.

Deputy Chris Andrews: The forced landing of Ryanair flight FR 4978, an Irish airline, put Ireland centre stage of an international incident. That any state would force an aeroplane to carry out an emergency landing to arrest a political opponent is wrong and cannot be tolerated. The Government, along with the rest of the EU, was fast and decisive in the approach to dealing with the forced landing and the arrest of the journalist, an outspoken critic of the Belarusian Government.

Freedom of the press and of political expression must be defended and upheld. This international incident has rightly called into question the role of the EU and the international community in defending the freedom of the press and political expression. Ireland's voice must be loud and clear in defending these values. We cannot allow trade deals to buy silence and inaction when these values are targeted by various governments. However, the strong, decisive and swift response towards Belarus with the imposition of sanctions highlights a certain double standard when it comes to defending these values. Where were the sanctions against the apartheid state of Israel, following the targeted bombing of several press and media outlets in Gaza last month by Israeli war planes? Al Jazeera's buildings were levelled. Where was the strong, decisive action when Israel's apartheid security forces physically assaulted and detained journalists who were covering the protests in occupied Palestine? These were clear acts to intimidate and suppress the freedom of the press.

Could the Minister indicate how much longer the EU will remain silent while the journalist, Julian Assange, is held captive? Julian Assange has done the world a great service by exposing crimes and human rights violations in Iraq and Afghanistan. He deserves everybody's gratitude, not his incarceration. When will Ireland speak up for these and all journalists, not just a select few?

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Deputy Paul Murphy: What happened here was the de facto hijacking of a Ryanair flight by Belarusian intelligence operatives to arrest a political dissident. It is very clear, despite the attempted obfuscation by the regime, that that is precisely what took place. These are the actions of a desperate dictator. Lukashenko has been in power for 27 years. They are actions that People Before Profit absolutely condemns. Lukashenko is a man who is under pressure from a mass movement from below to end his rule. He thinks he can get away with these kind of actions in pursuit of his dictatorial agenda of repression. We should raise our voices to demand that all political prisoners be immediately released. The actions of Lukashenko in targeting Roman Protasevich are aimed not just at him and his partner or the right-wing opposition in Belarus, of which they are probably a part, but also at the wider opposition movement, including the hundreds of thousands of workers who engage in general strike action against Lukashenko.

The immediate history to the current situation in Belarus is the supposed elections in August of last year, where Lukashenko claimed and was widely ridiculed for it to have won more than 80% of the vote. That provoked mass protests and mass movements from below from workers who were opposed to the robbing of an election, the repressive policies of the regime within Belarus and the agenda of privatisation that is being implemented within Belarus. The response by the regime to those protests has been one of repression. More than 30,000 activists have been arrested. Many people have been forced to leave the country and there have been widespread police and intelligence agency brutality against protesters, causing significant injuries. This is a horrendous regime and, although we as socialists have political differences with Roman Protasevich, we defend his right to fly and not have his flight downed by the Belarusian regime or not to be jailed for his political views. We support the movement against Lukashenko. We call for the privatisation programmes to be stopped and for the Lukashenko regime to be overthrown and a system based on a workers' democracy to be put in place.

One point I would make to the movement in Belarus, if people happen to be watching, is to be careful not to be allowed to be used by the forces of western imperialism. They have no interest in the actual democratic rights of the ordinary people in Belarus or the economic living standards of working-class people and are looking to engage in a new cold war between western imperialism and Russian imperialism, neither side of which represents the interests of ordinary working-class people anywhere in the world.

That brings me to the final point I want to make, which is the hypocrisy that is present in the righteous condemnation - a correct condemnation - of the actions of the Lukashenko regime. Nobody is asking the question of where Lukashenko got the idea that he could down a flight. Could the Government answer that question? Is it a coincidence that the Austrian Government downed a flight in an act of international piracy, just the same as the Lukashenko regime? In that case it involved the elected Head of State of Bolivia, Evo Morales, because it thought that Edward Snowden was on board. It is an incredibly similar action of international piracy with no condemnation by the EU or the Government. Instead of offering asylum to the likes of Edward Snowden or Julian Assange, who has been mentioned, the Government bows its head and only lifts a finger against Russia or states seen to be aligned to it whenever the major powers in Europe and the US tell it to. That is because the Government is subservient to the interests of US and western imperialism and is completely unwilling to take a principled, moral and political stand against the actions taken by those governments and those states that are allied to them. It is a Government that lets a foreign military power, the United States, use our infrastructure on its way to carry out its global campaign of war and terror.

The point about double standards applies. Again, to be clear, this is not whataboutery be-

cause I am 100% on record, and have been for years, in opposition to the Lukashenko regime. In the European Parliament, I spoke out about the Lukashenko regime and I support a revolution against Lukashenko. However, I ask why a Government that, correctly, is able to condemn those attacks on democratic rights, those repressive actions, is not willing to do it when it comes to the likes of the US Government? We made the point in the House about the US Government brutally oppressing indigenous people at Standing Rock. We called on the then Fine Gael Government to take action, to refuse to provide legitimacy to that regime and to show clear and unconditional support for the indigenous people, but it did not. The same happened in terms of the Black Lives Matter Movement, when we had police repression on the streets of the US, injuring thousands, in that we called for a statement of opposition and to expel the US ambassador. We look at what is taking place in Guantanamo Bay. The US has more than its fair share of political prisoners yet this Government would not be caught dead taking a stand.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Brendan Griffin, who is sharing time with Deputy Cormac Devlin.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I welcome that the Government, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, have brought the motion before the House as it is very important that we would do that. As I was coming into Leinster House earlier today, I paused briefly to speak to some of the demonstrators who had gathered outside the gates in solidarity with the people of Belarus. The thought struck me, as I informed one of the protesters that I would be speaking on the motion this evening in solidarity with them, that, in their own country, those people could not do that. Thankfully, in our country, in our democracy, we can do that freely and safely without the risk of being imprisoned like the hundreds of political prisoners in Belarus at the moment.

On the doorstep of the European Union in recent times, we have witnessed appalling abuses of fundamental human rights, whether it is from the regime in Israel most recently, as they shamed itself in front of the world, in Turkey or, of course, in Belarus. I concur with the very strong condemnation that has been expressed by Members on all sides of the House in regard to what has been happening in Belarus. When we think about this, it is just over a two and a half hour drive from one of our EU capitals to Minsk but, really, it is like driving into a different world, a far darker world, a far more dangerous world and a repressed world, right on the doorstep of the European Union. How we act now and into the future will be critical in regard to the stability of that entire region, and the safety and security of the European Union as well.

I want to express my solidarity with Roman Protasevich, Sofia Sapega and all of the aforementioned prisoners in Belarus. I am calling for their immediate release and for fair and free elections to take place in Belarus. I concur with the entire wording of the very strong motion that is before the House. I echo the words of Deputy Neale Richmond in regard to ensuring that we go further and that we fully utilise our position on the UN Security Council to ensure there is a strong global response and strong global action against this tyrannical regime in Belarus. We have to give full consideration to the call by Deputy Richmond in regard to making Ireland a safe place for those repressed activists in Belarus to come to. We have to follow our words with strong actions. Deputy Richmond's proposal this evening is a very solid one and one that should be given strong consideration by the Government and enacted, if possible.

What happened in regard to Ryanair flight FR4978 was an affront to the European Union and to all of our freedoms. As an Irishman, given it was an Irish airline, I feel it was an affront to our country as well. We cannot allow that to happen again. We must ensure there is severe

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punishment for what happened. The danger of normalising this and allowing it to happen again is that it would have far-reaching consequences. I hope this was the final straw, that bridge too far. It was total brazenness by the regime in Belarus. I hope it will now also be the catalyst for a change of regime in Belarus. It is simply not acceptable and it can never be acceptable. As I said, it puts all of our freedoms at risk when this type of thing happens.

The work of Libereco has been mentioned. I have signed up to be a godparent for one of the imprisoned activists in Belarus and I would encourage all parliamentarians in this country to do likewise. I commend Deputy Richmond on his proactive work in that regard and the other Irish parliamentarians, here and in the European Parliament, who have done so as well. It is very important that we would show solidarity with people who are defending what is right, defending democracy, defending what we hold so dear and what we value as a country and as a people. It is right that we, as the fairly elected representatives of our people, send a very strong message across Europe and across the world in solidarity with people who are incarcerated for defending that very right. It is not acceptable and it is never acceptable.

When we look at the world in recent years, when we look across the Atlantic, when we look at the devaluation of democracy that we saw in particular during the Trump Administration, that goes some way to explaining how there can be a devaluation of democracy in far more questionable regimes. That is the thin end of the wedge, unfortunately, and it has played a part in where we are at today.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, for bringing this robust motion before us. As many speakers said, the interference with Ryanair flight FR4978 by the Belarusian regime on Sunday, 23 May, was extremely worrying and frightening, especially for those on board. This Ryanair flight was operating between two EU capital cities, Athens and Vilnius, and was carrying more than 170 passengers, including many EU citizens, and six crew, when it was forced to land in Minsk by the military forces of the Belarusian regime. What would have happened if the flight had not co-operated with those instructions? As we know, it was escorted in the air, which is extremely worrying.

The illegal removal and detention of Roman Protasevich and his companion, Sofia Sapega, was a breach of all international norms and a gross violation of their human rights. This act of international piracy, committed by Alexander Lukashenko and his regime, was outrageous and cannot go unanswered. The brutality of the Lukashenko regime, now in its fifth term, is unprecedented and cannot be tolerated. The EU must respond firmly to this despicable crime and the ongoing repression and silencing of the opposition in Belarus. Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega must be released immediately. I will be continually asking through monthly parliamentary questions about their well-being until they are released.

Sadly, every day, we continue to see the regular harassment and intimidation of Belarusian civil society, journalists and independent media, with unjust detentions and apparent attempts to criminalise human rights work. The repression of the Belarusian people, who are peacefully and courageously defending their democratic and human rights, is totally unacceptable.

As we heard from my Fianna Fáil colleague, Deputy Seán Haughey, the 2020 Belarusian election was rigged, with Lukashenko receiving less than 25% of the popular vote. Fianna Fáil rejects the democratic and moral legitimacy of the Lukashenko regime and supports the Belarusian people in their demand for new and free elections, under the supervision of independent observers.

I welcome the European Council's strong condemnation of the hijacking of the Ryanair flight and the detention of Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega. The move to restrict EU flights from Belarusian airspace is welcome, as are plans to increase economic and political sanctions on the leaders of the Lukashenko regime.

I call on the Minister to raise the hijacking of Ryanair flight FR4978 and the other crimes of the Belarusian regime at the UN Security Council. There are currently 421 political prisoners in Belarus. I support the Government's motion calling for the immediate release of Roman Protasevich, Sofia Sapega and all those unjustly detained in Belarus. It states that the Dáil rejects the democratic legitimacy of Alexander Lukashenko following the fraudulent 9 August 2020 elections, and that Ireland stands in solidarity with the Belarusian people in their peaceful defence of democratic principles and fundamental human rights. As we heard earlier, people are protesting peacefully outside the Dáil today, not only trying to raise the plight of Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega but of all those who have been impacted since the regime took hold. It is important, as we have heard unanimously across the House, that people stand in solidarity today. It underscores the seriousness of what took place a few days ago. It is really important that the Government is able to speak with one voice on behalf of the people of Ireland to articulate our concerns and that of our European counterparts that this should not and will not be tolerated and that we stand in solidarity with the Belarusian people. I hope this motion passes.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I support the motion and call for an end to the repression in Belarus. Hijacking and piracy have no place in today's society regardless of who may be on board or their political persuasion. This was an Irish-operated flight with innocent passengers and flight staff on board. The grounding of this plane by this repressive regime is wrong and caused great fear, endangering innocent passengers and staff alike.

The attacks on those who oppose this anti-democratic regime must end and those who carry out these attacks on their behalf must be held accountable. There has been international condemnation of these actions from the United States and the EU, which is right and proper, but we also need to acknowledge the selective non-condemnation of similar events. For instance, in 2013, a French plane with the Bolivian president Evo Morales was grounded on the suspicion that the US National Security Agency whistleblower, Edward Snowden, was on board. On that occasion there was not a peep of condemnation. Unfortunately, many of those who contributed here have also engaged in selective condemnation of such incidents.

The EU must be seen to act fairly in its sanction and breaches of international law. To be clear, I commend those who have called for sanctions to be imposed on Belarus for this air hijacking. All countries which break international laws should be brought to task for their actions. Again, I note the total lack of calls for sanctions on Israel and the Israel Defense Force for its onslaught on innocent civilians, Palestinian men, women and children, with indiscriminate bomb attacks and a displacement of Palestinian families who have lived in their homes for many, many generations.

Let me echo the call for the EU to impose the strongest measures available as soon as possible, but also to impose the same sanctions on all those who break international law, including in the last number of weeks and in previous years in respect of the attacks on Palestine by Israel, which have been acknowledged as major breaches of international law for decades. It is critical that the international community sends the message that this type of behaviour will not be tolerated by any country and it is of the utmost importance that the Government uses its place on the UN Security Council and within the EU to make it abundantly clear that Ireland condemns these

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actions and all actions against international law in the most robust terms.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I welcome this debate and the opportunity to speak on the worsening situation in Belarus. I note the comments of previous speakers and wish to add my voice to the chorus of condemnation that has already been heard in this Chamber. Accordingly, I am very happy to support this motion as it stands. The events of 23 May over Belarus were scandalous and completely unacceptable at so many different levels. First, the intercepting diverting and forced landing of a Ryanair civilian airliner in Minsk was an incredible and unprecedented event in modern history. For all intents, it was state hijacking, state terrorism and state piracy all in one on a ridiculous pretext of a bogus bomb warning from Hamas and the subsequent charade of a baggage search on the airport tarmac. It was an insult to everyone's intelligence. Second, it was also the state kidnapping of a journalist and opposition activist Roman Protasevich and his travelling companion Sofia Sapega. If that was not enough, both detainees were subjected to forced confessions on television, sporting bruises on their faces, as well as their ongoing arbitrary and indefinite incarceration. Third, at an EU level, it was also an attack on both freedom of expression and freedom of movement and a threat to the safety of civil aviation, not to mention the unjustified subsequent expulsion of Latvian diplomats from Belarus, again, on false pretences. In summary, this was a new low for an already discredited authoritarian regime and when coupled with the rigged elections of nine months ago, which were neither free nor fair, it represents a further significant and sinister deterioration in the situation.

From a specifically Irish perspective, however, the ability of foreign agents to operate so freely in Athens poses very uncomfortable questions for our own sovereignty as it brings into sharp focus the potential for similar actions by foreign agents in this jurisdiction and our lack of counter espionage security services and resources. Furthermore, it once again highlights our own sovereign lack of control of our own airspace, if any more evidence was needed.

Where do we go from here? I am glad the Minister for Foreign Affairs confirmed that an investigation by the United Nations International Civil Aviation Organization is now under way to formally determine the facts of the incident and that this committee will report by 26 June. Second, I welcome the fact that EU aircraft will no longer overfly Belarusian airspace and that Belarusian aircraft will no longer be permitted to land in EU airports or even enter EU airspace. Finally, I welcome €3 billion of EU money that has been provisionally put on the table to encourage a peaceful transition of Belarus from an authoritarian state to a functioning democracy and I am very glad this investment is on hold with the transition process gets under way. All these measures are appropriate, but we can go further and the EU needs to adopt a tougher stance from a Belarusian point of view. For instance, additional targeted sanctions on President Lukashenko and his senior officials and entities should now be considered, unless there is an immediate and unconditional release of both detainees. Targeted sanctions will not suffice, however, and we should also couple sanctions against the regime with supports for the innocent general population. For instance, EU visas could temporarily be considered for Belarusians facing persecution or the risk of arbitrary arrest at home. The EU should also engage with and support the Belarusian government in exile and recognise it as the legitimate transitional government of Belarus. Perhaps most importantly, consideration should be given to inviting Belarusian opposition leaders to address the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence or perhaps even the Dáil proper in plenary session. Finally, more pressure should be exerted on Moscow to intervene positively. New independently monitored elections are needed in Belarus as soon as possible.

The regime of President Lukashenko is one of the last dictatorships in Europe. Ireland

needs to leverage its influential position at EU and UN levels to mobilise the international community and support the peaceful transition to democracy.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister of State for the strong statement from this House, and I trust the motion will pass later. I admire the principled stance the Government has taken on this matter. I acknowledge the speed with which the UN has acknowledged that this matter, particularly the forced landing of an aircraft to extract a citizen from it, is very serious. It is a disgraceful act of tyranny.

The circumstances in Belarus has been deteriorating for some time. I visited Minsk some years ago with fellow Members of the Oireachtas and saw at first hand an entire generation of Belarusian citizens who were unfortunately still suffering from the effects of the Chernobyl tragedy. The current events are so horrific and, considering the response of the west, involving inevitable sanctions against the Belarusian Government, the citizens will suffer. While I welcome the €3 billion commitment by the EU, I do not believe it is enough. We should do more in that regard.

I commend the many charities that do incredible work in Belarus. Ms Adi Roche was mentioned by Deputy Richmond. Former Deputy Coonan did great work with children in Belarus. It is important that we continue our outreach work in that country.

The oppressive regime of Alexander Lukashenko has lost all credibility, not that it ever had any. It is not fit to represent the people of Belarus. They do not see the recent election results as legitimate. I stand in solidarity with them today and those members of the Belarusian community who were outside Dáil Éireann a little earlier. The 2020 election saw significant irregularities, and independent experts have cited widespread electoral fraud in favour of Mr. Lukashenko. Since that time, the regime has launched brutal crackdowns on peaceful protesters and the media. It was mentioned that there were tens of thousands of arrests, and many have been subjected to a denial of human rights and civil liberties.

We in Ireland have a long and rightly proud history of speaking out against authoritarian governments and highlighting the plight of persecuted peoples. Our positions in the EU and on the UN Security Council afford us an even greater platform to shine a light on authoritarian leaders and foster the growth of democracy. As a former head of delegation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly, which position I had for the past seven years, I met many parliamentarians from around the world, including Belarus. This latest turn of events appals both them and me. Mr. Lukashenko's government has acted increasingly erratically. The forced landing of the Ryanair flight is a symbolic sign of desperation. Forcing the landing of a civil aircraft flying between two EU nations is simply unacceptable. It is a State-backed act of piracy.

The seizing of the aircraft to facilitate Mr. Roman Protasevich, a journalist who has been critical of the stolen election in 2020, symbolises all that we know that is true of tyrants: they fear an open press, they fear allowing their people the freedom to choose, and they fear an independent judiciary. We know the regime is using violence and intimidation in a desperate attempt to suppress the will of the people. This includes mass incarceration on political grounds, the use of torture and disappearances. This is an affront to anybody who believes in human rights, democracy and freedom. We must use our position in the international community to foster a democratic movement in Belarus and support the operation of a free press within the State.

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Supporting sanctions against the regime, along with other international measures, must be only the first step on a path to allowing democracy to flourish in Belarus. Supporting the opposition, electoral reform efforts and system change must be further encouraged. I am pleased the EU is committing to a fund of €3 billion but it is not enough. We must and can do more. We must also recognise that support for the regime should not be tolerated by any nation.

We cannot avoid the fact that the Russian Government has provided Lukashenko with political cover and offered a range of supports to the regime. It is not the first time the Russian Government has done this, and it most certainly will not be the last. Russia has destabilised regions of eastern Europe and far beyond. The annexation of Crimea in recent years, the threatening of nations such as Georgia, the attacks on critics of the Kremlin at home and abroad, certain cyber activity, and the brutal repression of opposition journalists and activists are examples. This behaviour is a threat to all European nations. It has been mentioned by one of my colleagues. Countries on the doorstep of the European Union have experienced difficulties associated with the Russian regime.

A fundamental pillar that underpins freedom and democracy cannot be taken for granted. Freedom and democracy require dedication and the continuous efforts of successive generations. We can see these norms being chipped away at within the EU and externally. Hungary and Poland, for instance, have both shown willingness to roll back on the liberties that have been so hard won.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am happy to have an opportunity once again to speak on this subject. Through the good offices of the Ceann Comhairle, I had a Topical Issue debate on the subject last week. For that, I was grateful. I believe, having listened to the various speeches in the House, that it is generally recognised that a situation is developing in Belarus caused by its hijacking of a civilian aircraft en route to a destination in the EU. This is sinister. It is terrorist activity and it needs to be dealt with. If it is not dealt with forcefully and convincingly, there will be repeats. One should remember that in the not-too-distant past in the region of eastern Europe in question, aeroplanes, including passenger aeroplanes, have been shot down, resulting in the annihilation of all the passengers. I cannot imagine the terror on board the Ryanair flight when it was hijacked and directed to a different location than the one it had in mind. What occurred was done irrespective of international law. International law did not matter and does not matter to some people.

I congratulate the Minister and Minister of State for the tremendous work they have done in this area and for bringing this issue to the fore, not only here but also across the rest of Europe. I have no doubt they will continue to do so through the United Nations. If this kind of atrocity is not dealt with meaningfully, it will happen again.

I said last weekend that I believe the international criminal courts are the places to deal with these matters. If people have to be tried in their absence, let them be, but there must be retribution. If there is not, the circumstances will arise time and again. It would only remain to be seen who would take the opportunity next to do something similar. If it goes unpunished, there will be repeats.

As others have mentioned, that are various locations across the globe where there are major and frightening abuses of human rights. People say from time to time that we do not have civil liberties, including in Ireland, but it must be realised that in some parts of the globe, things are happening to peace-loving people, including women and children, that are appalling. That

these abuses should happen in the 21st century is a sad reflection on society. It is a sad reflection on humanity and on what humanity can do to humanity at certain times. Sometimes it is in times of war but sometimes not. Widespread and large-scale abuses against women and children all over Africa and in some parts of eastern Europe, including through the slave trade and the trafficking of women and little children, occur without demur. Nobody raises a word about them and those who do are deemed to comprise a fringe group.

6 o'clock

I would say the time has come for the international community to recognise the seriousness of the situation that is unfolding before us and to take clear action. We should let it be known to the perpetrators that whoever they are and wherever they are, there will be retribution and the price that can and will be paid is high from their point of view.

I believe people will always suffer. The crucial issue is that people do something about it when someone raises the issue. However, people have to raise it again and again. We should introduce sanctions in every which way possible to ensure the perpetrators know full well now that whatever they do in future there will be a price to be paid.

Deputy Michael Collins: Tensions between the European Union and Belarus have increased since a Ryanair flight was forced to land in Minsk and a Belarusian journalist was taken off a flight. Since 23 May the journalist and his girlfriend have been detained in Belarus. This journalist ran a blog that was in opposition to the current Belarusian leader, Mr. Lukashenko, who has ruled the country since 1994. The main opposition leader against Mr. Lukashenko in the country's elections last year said that a lawyer who visited the couple said they were fine. Yet, it was doubtful because for sure the journalist was tortured and beaten. He was charged with organising riots, a charge that carries a potential sentence of 15 years. A day after he was arrested the journalist said he was confessing, but observers said the statement appeared to be forced.

When the Belarusian strongman plucked a dissident journalist out of the sky he proved two things. The first is that his 27-year grip on power is unhindered by international isolation. The second is that in the absence of meaningful action by the United States and Europe, whose citizens were among the passengers on the hijacked flight, nothing will change. It now appears that the journalist has been beaten and forced to confess to organising mass riots. As many Ministers in this country have said, this is nothing short of an act of piracy. It has also been said that we have to ensure the journalist and his partner need to be protected in every way possible.

We also need to look at our country and the incident that happened off the coast of Castletownbere last Friday, which was nothing short of an act of piracy. A Spanish trawler tried to ram into an Irish fishing vessel. It was a scandal to say the least. Regardless of all the pleas for help to our Naval Service to save our Irish vessel, it was left for 12 or 14 hours before any actions took place and the Spanish trawler had taken off. Acts of piracy can take place in the air and on our seas, and they can go unhindered. We need a strong Government to be able to act with our partners in Europe to ensure our skies are monitored and actions like this never recur. We also need our Government to act and support our fishing vessels off Castletownbere when our citizens are in danger and continue to be in danger.

Today, the Taoiseach made a false statement about me in the Dáil. I would appreciate if he retracted that statement. He said I had been ringing him seeking favours. I never rang the man

in my entire life, to be honest, but that is another issue for another day.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this important matter. I thank the Minister, Deputy Coveney; the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne; and the Government for being proactive in this regard. This was a terrible thing that happened to a Ryanair plane. It was forced to land. It reminds us of James Bond but there is a more serious aspect to this when we see what they did in the open skies to a plane that was not theirs and there were civilians on board. What are they doing to their own people in their own land? That is what we are hearing.

I am worried about sanctions. That government or dictatorship has to be sanctioned and it has to be rooted out. The global community must get together and root these fellows out of office, make it difficult for them and get them out of power. We are all calling on the EU, the UN, the United States and everyone. We must join together to ensure that this dictatorship is got out of office. We should get him out of power and restore an elected government in that country for the people who live there. Like Deputy Durkan said, it is so sad to see what these villains are doing to ordinary human beings. It is terrible and we must all stick together to root these people out of where they are.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I compliment the Government and support the motion this evening. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The dictatorship has been in power for that length of time. The strongest rebuttal must be sent to this action from those of us in Ireland. Ireland is a neutral country, as we always claim. We must defend the persecuted people of Belarus.

I have fond memories of Adi Roche, a Clonmel woman, the children she brought and all the host families after that awful tragedy with the nuclear power station. The Irish people supported them and showed courage and generosity.

The Government with this motion will relay a clear signal to the UN and the EU that we cannot have European airspace invaded or have a plane forced down and people kidnapped from it. It is an act of war really and of total oppression. Then we hear about intimidation and mistreatment and people being forced to make false statements. It is all because they were trying to promote democracy and had the courage to oppose that dictator in an election and try to change the life of the people. Russia has to be held to account as well. While sanctions will hurt ordinary people, they are really necessary. We know how fragile democracy is. In the past 14 months we have seen in our country how fragile democracy is and how people are concerned about further erosion of power. We need to be careful. We need to send the clearest and strongest message to every country in the world that this cannot and will not be tolerated.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have no hesitation in supporting the motion. I note that the language was strengthened from the original motion from the committee in the name of the former Minister for Justice. I have no difficulty with that.

However, I have to balance that by saying the strength and speed of the reaction screams out in respect of our failure to act up to now on Palestine, Poland, Hungary and other countries to which I will come back. We should be mindful of the role that America has played and continues to play in destabilising many countries in the world, especially in Latin America and Central America.

I welcome the motion and have no hesitation in saying it. I also welcome that the Inter-

national Civil Aviation Organization is conducting an investigation. We will wait to see what happens but I have no doubt those responsible have completely transgressed international law and acted completely without legal authority. I have no problem in saying that.

On 24 May the EU Council adopted conclusions on Belarus at its summit one day after the plane was taken from the sky. We have economic sanctions banning overflight of EU airspace by Belarus. The statement calls on all EU carriers to avoid overflight of Belarus and correctly demands the immediate release of the journalist and his girlfriend.

What do we do about Poland? There are lesbian, gay and LGBTI-free zones and increased levels of people being arrested. The country has rowed back on abortion rights. In Hungary we have seen the erosion of the rule of law, academic freedom and media independence. I could go on but my time is limited.

The volume of trade between the EU and Israel speaks volumes. In 2020 the figure amounted to €31 billion. The trade between the EU and Saudi Arabia amounted to €40 billion. We have taken no moral stance, or any other stance, with regard to Israel or Saudi Arabia. Jamal Khashoggi - and I apologise if I have mispronounced his name - was shockingly murdered in Turkey in 2018 and Saudi Arabia has been bombing Yemen since 2015. Some countries, such as Germany, have done the right thing and banned arms trade with Saudi Arabia. Others have not. France was the third largest exporter of arms to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. I will finish in the coming seconds but, if we want to remain a credible influencer in the world, we must look in the mirror and judge this action by the same standards as all these other actions. Let us look have a look at our approach to Palestine, Poland, Hungary and other countries and change that approach.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The recent abduction of Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega was an act of air piracy that should shock us all. It was a brazen upfront demonstration on the part of Belarus that it will do whatever it wants on its own territory and elsewhere in its efforts to silence those who try to hold its government to account. This act further reflects the growing authoritarianism that is insidiously creeping across the world, backed and supported by other authoritarian regimes. Here in Ireland, we sit comfortably in our homes believing that we are far removed from all of this and that we are safe but the past two weeks should have given us pause for thought as an Irish airline fell victim to a state-sponsored hijacking and our entire health system was brought to its knees, the victim of a cyberattack that is likely to have originated in a country that seeks to destabilise western democracies. We may think we are insulated on our little green rock in the Atlantic, but we are not.

I fully support the Government's strongly worded motion. It does not mince words and calls out the democratic illegitimacy of the election of Lukashenko. It condemns the violence and repression perpetrated by his regime and, crucially, calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Protasevich and Sapega.

I cannot imagine and, in truth, do not even want to imagine the fear and terror felt by Protasevich and Sapega as they were dragged off that Ryanair flight. We cannot let that act go unanswered and, so far, this Government and the EU have not done so. Today, a number of Dáil colleagues and I, along with the Minister of State, met a number of Belarusian citizens who are living in Ireland. They described the fear felt by their families, friends and communities living under the repressive regime of Lukashenko and his links to Russia. I have also adopted a political prisoner, Maksim Zinevich, through the good work of Libereco, which is an organisation

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that works to protect human rights in Ukraine and Belarus. I urge my colleagues to do the same.

Our words today are strong but we can do more. We should look at our economic ties with Belarus and pursue the imposition of sanctions, where possible. We should look at the possibility of providing a number of scholarships for students who have been thrown out of university. We should simplify our visa application process, use our influence in international sporting organisations and, with our EU colleagues, try to support independent news agencies that have been shut down in Belarus. This matter should not be a one-week wonder. It should remain on the agendas of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Dáil.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Gabhaim buíochas le gach duine a labhair sa díospóireacht seo. Members have rightly condemned the actions of the Lukashenko regime. It is important that we have spoken with one voice, across all parties, against the Lukashenko regime and in full support of the ordinary people of Belarus, both those in the country itself and those who can no longer live there and who had to flee to other countries. The diversion of the Ryanair flight to Minsk under transparently false pretences, a ruse, recklessly endangered lives. This outrage joins the countless thousands of other incidents that have brought sorrow to individuals and families in Belarus and among its diaspora. The motion provides an opportunity to clearly express what is happening in Belarus. It is something the whole House finds unacceptable.

Members have spoken about the quick action on this issue. Lukashenko chose the wrong weekend to do this as the European Council was meeting the following day. The Council had no option but to take the strongest possible action, which was called for by everybody, and it did so. That is important because it sends a strong message to authoritarian regimes all around the world. It says that they cannot do this and get away with it. That cannot happen.

Ireland will always play a constructive role in the EU's strong response to the unacceptable actions at Minsk. This happened at last week's meeting of the European Council. The Taoiseach was involved in quite a number of bilateral engagements with colleagues in addition to attending engagements around the Council table. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, and I also had bilateral contacts, including contacts with the Belarusian opposition. I was glad to take to take a phone call from Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, one of the leaders of the opposition in Belarus, in the immediate aftermath of the incident. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Taoiseach also had many engagements.

The individual sanctions up to now have clearly not been effective because, had they been, they would have prevented this incident. We now seek to target the wallets of the regime and its supporters. We will continue to monitor our broader relations with Belarus, including involvement in the Eastern Partnership mechanism. Our support for the people is clear and unequivocal. We keep the people of Belarus to the fore in all of our efforts. The EU has diverted funds away from the authorities in Belarus and directed them to civil society. Neighbouring member states have given refuge to those who have had to flee Lukashenko's repression and have supported scholarships for Belarusian students who have been removed from universities for expressing their views.

I pay tribute to the three Baltic states and to Poland, the states most directly affected by the actions of Lukashenko and those that have the most dealings with him. It is very dangerous to be a neighbour of Belarus and these states are particularly concerned. I express solidarity not only with Belarus and its people, but with the country's neighbours as well.

Through the European Endowment for Democracy, Ireland has given money towards projects that seek to protect human rights and media freedoms in Belarus. We continue to do what we can to support these projects. I welcome the positive vision for a future democratic Belarus, which the European Commission has outlined in recent days. The EU has offered €3 billion in funding for an economic stabilisation package, which contrasts sharply with Lukashenko's offer of further repression, corruption, economic stagnation and poverty. Under Lukashenko, escape from the country is all its people can hope for.

Let me be clear that the EU and Ireland are not playing geopolitics. We do not want to alter the orientation of Belarusian foreign relations. All we want is a prosperous stable neighbour that has full respect for the human rights of its citizens, democratic principles and the rule of law. Those three concerns are, of course, central to participation in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE. As a participating state, Belarus has committed to those principles. It needs to return to, and stick to, those commitments. The chairpersonship and office of the OSCE have offered to facilitate meaningful, broad-based, inclusive national dialogue with the political opposition and civil society. This needs to happen.

Belarus is also a member of the UN, as has been mentioned. I remind the House that the preamble to the UN Charter reaffirms "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person". From the repressive acts we have seen taking place, it is clear that those principles have no home in Lukashenko's Belarus. Belarus must acknowledge its international obligations and fully engage with the investigation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. A care for human rights is at the core of our engagement with the wider world. We take that care for human rights in regard to all of our relations around the world. Our words and deeds have been consistent with this focus and we continue to seek a peaceful and democratic resolution to the crisis. It is essential that the harassment and suppression of the political opposition in Belarus be brought to an end. All of Belarusian society, at home and abroad, needs to be part of creating a new and prosperous future in Belarus, including those who support Lukashenko. This is why dialogue, people coming together and having free and fair elections are so important.

The Belarus opposition is a broad-based movement. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is the international figurehead of the movement. She has never claimed to be the sole representative, but it is worth recalling her links with this country, having come here as a Chernobyl child to escape that particular accident and to get rehabilitation and treatment, along with many other children. She continued to come here after that to help other children affected and, I believe, she worked in this country as well. Like Belarus, she has very strong links with Ireland. Those links date back to ancient history, through migration in very ancient times. There are some similarities between the Irish Celtic languages and Slavic languages. There are other members of the opposition as well under the Coordination Council established by Ms Tikhanovskaya, including the former Minister for Culture, Pavel Latushko, Maria Kalesnikava and the Nobel laureate, Svetlana Alexievich. All have either left the country or have been detained by the Lukashenko regime.

The European Parliament has rightly recognised the Coordination Council's courageous and peaceful defence of democracy and human rights by awarding it the 2020 Sakharov prize for freedom of thought. The Taoiseach, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and I have all commended Svetlana Tikhanovskaya for her personal bravery. As I said, she knows this country well. We have extended an invitation for her to visit Ireland. It is expected that that may happen in July when public health conditions permit. We look forward to welcoming her back to our shores in the near future. I hope that there will be an opportunity for her to visit Tipperary

on that occasion as well.

I want to acknowledge the many Belarusian people who now call Ireland home, some of whom I met today and previously. They have worked tirelessly to maintain public awareness of the situation in the country of their birth. Many Irish people have close personal ties to Belarus, as mentioned in the debate. The Government has received a large volume of communications from Irish citizens about the situation in Belarus. I assure them that we are doing all we can to help the people of Belarus.

A number of issues were raised in the debate. It is slightly unfortunate that some people chose to raise other issues that are not directly related to this matter. On the European Union, the Government is very strong on the importance of the rule of law within the Union. There is no comparison to be made between Belarus and any member state and no comparison to be made with regard to the flight in Austria, which was mentioned by a couple of Deputies. On that occasion the President of Austria had breakfast with the President of Bolivia on the aeroplane. There is no comparison whatsoever in the two situations.

Last week, this House spoke with one voice on the Israel-Palestine situation. We need to continue to speak in one voice. We should not in a foreign policy discussion here say that we support something, but what about something else? This country's interests have been always well served when we speak with one voice on foreign policy, be that in regard to Brexit, most famously over the past number of years or the Israel-Palestine situation on which we made history last week and spoke with one voice. Speaking with one voice today gives us incredible strength.

It appears that nobody is opposing the motion and that it is unanimously supported by Members. I very much welcome that. I would welcome it if, as I expect, the motion will be passed unanimously without the need for a vote.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Congratulations to all involved.

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 Thomas Pringle - to discuss a review of the disabled drivers scheme and primary medical certificate qualification assessment criteria; (2) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the plan for reintroduction of live music in the hospitality sector; (3) Deputy Joe Flaherty - to discuss the need for a dedicated fibre connection for the new public library in Edgeworthstown, County Longford; (4) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - an gá atá ann go gcuirfeair airgead ar fáil le córas séarachais baile nua a chur ar fáil i gCill Rónáin Inis Mór, Árann; (5) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss the absence in north Kildare of psychological services for children, especially children with autism; (6) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the funding gap in the grant and actual cost of the works for replacing lead piping particularly in pre-1970s houses; (7) Deputy Patrick Costello - to discuss the child and adolescent mental health service, CAMHS, as it is currently operating; (8) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss the reinstatement of the school library grant; (9) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss the ruling by the European Committee of Social Rights

on housing and breaches of the social charter by the Irish State; (10) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Michael Collins, Carol Nolan and Danny Healy-Rae - to discuss a serious international incident with a Spanish trawler that occurred on the south west coast; (11) Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Joan Collins - to discuss the imminent closure of Hesed House on Tyrconnell Road, Inchicore, an integral counselling and psychotherapy service for young people and their families; (12) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss issues that led to a large flotilla of trawlers recently gathering in Cork Harbour and the subsequent demonstration by fishermen; (13) Deputies Darren O'Rourke and Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss bringing forward a survival and recovery plan for the taxi industry to ensure the sustainability of this vital public service; (14) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss the review of the *ex-gratia* scheme for survivors of sexual abuse in day schools; (15) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the delays in processing primary medical certificate applications; (16) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss support the Government can provide to the family of Gavin McShane in their campaign for justice; (17) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the immediate need for safe infrastructure in Kealkill, County Cork for students to walk and cycle safely to school.

The matters raised by the Deputies Pringle, Stanton, Quinlivan and Ó Cúiv have been selected for discussion.

Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am sharing time with Deputies Conway-Walsh, Tully, Ó Laoghaire, Mitchell and Stanley. I am glad that I can introduce the Bill on Second Stage to the House. For far too long, Deputies will have heard me talk about how consumers have been ripped off by the insurance industry, which has put its customers at the bottom of the list in terms of priorities. Insurance is an essential part of a functioning economy. In many instances, it is a legal requirement. While consumers have no choice but to pay for insurance, the industry has a choice as to how it treats its consumers. For far too long, it has treated its consumers badly. That is the reality.

An investigation by the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, has found that some of the biggest players in the industry, AIG, Allianz, Axa, Aviva and FBD engaged in price-fixing cartel-like activity and behaviour for a 21-month period between 2015 and 2016. In doing so, they reduced competition and increased prices for their customers. Last December, the Central Bank confirmed that the industry was engaged in dual pricing, a price gouging activity that targets loyal and vulnerable customers and then hits them with artificially high premiums whenever they renew. Sinn Féin has drafted legislation that would ban this practice as the Financial Conduct Authority, FCA, in Britain has done. I ask the Government to end the delay it placed on that legislation so that the Dáil can end this discriminatory practice at the earliest opportunity.

When it comes to prices, the average motor insurance premium has risen by 35% over the past decade, despite the cost of claims reducing over the same period by 9%. Despite all of this, the insurance industry has received a listening ear in government to air its grievances and has regurgitated many of them which were false. This Dáil has responded to one such grievance and delivered for it. The Judicial Council Act was passed by the Dáil in 2019 and, ultimately, led to the personal injuries guidelines that came into effect on 24 April this year. These new

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guidelines reduce the level of damages for personal injury awards from between 38% and 69%, but the average being 50% across the board, cutting the cost of claims for the insurance industry and guaranteeing it significant savings as a result. As the Ceann Comhairle and others will know, Sinn Féin supported these guidelines for one reason, that is, that they would reduce the cost of claims and, in doing so, reduce the cost of insurance for customers.

The insurance industry made a promise to pass on these savings to its customers in the form of reduced premiums. We were even told how much we could expect premiums to reduce. In 2019, the CEO of Zurich insurance told the finance committee the following with regard to a 50% drop in awards for soft tissue personal injuries: “It would be quite reasonable that if that were to happen and insurers had not reduced their prices, with all things being equal, by somewhere in the region of 10% to 15%, the committee should be asking a lot of questions.” In regard to business insurance, he said that we should expect prices to fall by 20%. They are the figures of the CEO of Zurich. Maybe we should expect more. It was straight from the horse’s mouth that these guidelines provided for these types of reductions. What we need now is an immediate and significant reduction in insurance premiums paid by customers, including motorists, businesses and homeowners. That is clearly not happening.

In a survey conducted by my party, we received more than 1,300 responses. Of those who had received a renewal quote since the new guidelines came into effect, 58% saw their premium increase despite having made no claims in the previous 12 months and only 22% saw a reduction in their premiums. With the new guidelines in place, every customer who has not made a claim should have seen his or her premium fall. However, the Government’s strategy has been to cross its fingers and hope the industry will do the right thing by cutting premiums in response to the guidelines. I say we can do much better than that.

We need a measure that will provide oversight and hold the industry to account. That is precisely what this legislation does. It requires insurance companies to provide information to the Central Bank each year for the next four years, including the amount paid by the company in personal injury claims and the amount it would have paid in such claims had the personal injury guidelines not come into effect. In addition, companies would have to inform the Central Bank of the average premium charged under policies covering third-party personal injuries and the average premium that would have been charged had the guidelines not been implemented. The Central Bank would then be required to submit a report outlining this information to the Minister for Finance on an annual basis, with a copy laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas.

Those reports will show everyone how much the insurance industry has saved as a result of the implementation of the personal injury guidelines and, crucially, whether it has passed on all of those savings, euro for euro, to its customers. If it has not, we will know about it and so will its customers. Not only will this hold the industry to account, it will apply pressure on it to cut premiums immediately and significantly. After reforms reduced whiplash awards in Britain, similar regulations to those contained in this Bill were introduced there, coming into effect in March last year. Some of the largest players in the Irish market, including RSA Insurance, Aviva Insurance, AXA, Zurich, Allianz and AIG, are also the largest players in Britain and are subject in that jurisdiction to requirements akin to those set out in this legislation. We should not accept any less oversight for customers in this State. This legislation will provide that oversight and there is no legitimate reason for the Government or any Member to reject or oppose it unless he or she is doing the bidding of the industry.

The Minister of State knows that what is proposed in this legislation is right and he will

not vote against it. However, the Government has indicated its intention to propose that the Bill not pass to the next stage, which is pre-legislative scrutiny, for nine months. Why under God would the Government do that? All we are trying to do is make the insurance companies live up to their promise to reduce premiums for customers and ensure the same oversight that applies when they sell a policy in Newry, Belfast or Derry applies when they sell a policy in this State. I ask the Minister of State to drop the Government amendment and let the Bill go to pre-legislative scrutiny. If he does, I will give a commitment to work with him and his Department to ensure the legislation is robust and fit for purpose and, if needed, that it is amended on Committee Stage after we have had proper legislative scrutiny.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I commend my colleague and party finance spokesperson, Deputy Doherty, on bringing forward this Bill. He has provided an opportunity to all Oireachtas Members, from all parties and none, to demonstrate to the people who have been crucified by high insurance costs that this House is prepared to stand for fairness. Insurance companies have hidden for years behind the book of quantum. They have continually and consistently used the high cost of personal injury claims as cover for charging eye-watering premiums for compulsory insurance. Since the personal injury guidelines took effect on 24 April this year, they no longer have that defence.

We know from experience that every possible tactic is used by the insurance industry to keep the raw data hidden from those who ask why Irish policyholders are forced to pay extortionate premiums. Indeed, the European Commission was sufficiently concerned about price-fixing and the cartel-like behaviours of motor insurance providers that it conducted unannounced inspections. When the CCPC conducted its own investigations, it found a lack of data on the market was serving as a barrier to new entrants. Price gouging and ripping off of people who are legally required to purchase insurance must stop. It is not enough just to stabilise the situation as it is. There must be a reversal of the crippling cost of insurance.

That is why this Bill is so important. Put simply, it will require insurance providers to provide relevant data to the Central Bank that will show whether savings from the implementation of the new guidelines are being passed on to policyholders. The substantial reduction in insurance costs must be the endgame. Otherwise, the guidelines are just a paper exercise to increase the profits of the insurance industry. We must stop dancing to the tune of the industry. The Government needs to tackle the exploitation of people who can least afford to hand over their hard-earned money but are left with no other option. Reductions in the cost of insurance claims must be passed on to customers.

This Bill will guarantee the outcome we need. It will apply pressure on the industry to pass on all the savings it makes, euro for euro, to its customers. We know the new guidelines reduce the level of personal injury awards by between 31% and 69%. Similar regulations came into effect in Britain, as Deputy Doherty indicated, following a reduction in the level of whiplash injury awards. Many of the same insurers that are active in the British market are operating here. Motorists, business owners and homeowners need us to make a stand for them and they need us to do it now.

Deputy Pauline Tully: Commitments made by the insurance industry that a reduction in insurance awards would result in a reduction in insurance costs for consumers are not being met. In fact, many motorists, homeowners and business people are seeing their premiums increase. When members of the insurance industry appeared before the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, their call for the implementation of personal

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injury guidelines was made with the commitment that a reduction in the volume of claims would result in a reduction in the price of premiums. With that in mind, the Oireachtas passed legislation to that end and the guidelines took legal effect on 24 April last, replacing the book of quantum in determining the level of awards in personal injury cases. The Judicial Council subsequently reduced the awards payable substantially in the light of the guidelines.

On the day the new guidelines came into force, the director of the Alliance for Insurance Reform was reported in *The Irish Times* as saying he expected insurance premium charges to be “significantly reduced” from the following Monday. However, the insurance industry has put the brakes on many of the commitments it made in terms of reducing premium costs. We are not seeing much evidence of the industry passing on those savings. Premiums have not been reduced for motorists, homeowners and business people in line with the reduction in awards. It seems the insurance companies have simply pocketed the bulk of the savings arising from the reductions in awards, despite the commitments they gave.

Since the guidelines came into effect, we have seen a dramatic reduction in insurance awards, with the level decreasing in some cases by more than 50%. We need a way to verify that those reductions in awards are passed on to consumers in the form of lower insurance prices. The legislation introduced by my colleague, Deputy Doherty, will ensure that happens and will provide much-needed transparency on this issue. It will provide the Department of Finance with the ability to make regulations that require insurance companies to provide information to the Central Bank on how the new personal injury guidelines have impacted on premiums for policyholders. It will force the industry to pass the savings it makes on to its customers.

Similar regulations have come into effect in Britain, where many insurers in the Irish market also operate. The operations of those companies in Ireland should be subject to no less scrutiny. Consumers cannot afford to wait any longer. The Government cannot just sit back and hope insurance companies will do the right thing by reducing premiums. The industry needs to be held to account and this legislation will allow that to happen.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: When we talk to people about the insurance industry and how it has conducted itself in recent years, they have many things to say. Comments that are made regularly to me are that it is a law unto itself, it is beyond reach, reproach and sanction, and it is unaccountable. Who pays the price for that? It is paid by the businesses struggling to find any kind of affordable insurance cover at a time they are under severe pressure. It is paid by the childcare facilities struggling to secure insurance, many of which are going out of business. The price is paid by businesses operating in very specific areas, such as soft play providers. It is paid by young people trying to get on the road and spread their wings, many of whom may need a car to get any kind of job or get to university. All of these people are being denied by what the insurance industry is doing.

This Bill seeks to make the industry accountable. Insurance companies made big commitments that if the costs of awards and damages came down, they would pass that saving on to their customers. They said in 2019 that if awards decreased by 50%, they would reduce motor premiums by 15% and business insurance by 20%. These guidelines have been in place for more than a month but there is no evidence yet of this being passed on to the consumer. The Government’s policy so far has been to cross its fingers and hope the insurance industry will do the right thing and reduce premiums. That is not good enough. The industry needs to be held to account to deliver on its promise. Businesses in Cork, including in my constituency, and everywhere else are under very severe financial pressure because of the pandemic. The least

they deserve is not to be ripped off by insurance firms taking advantage. This Bill would force insurance companies to pass these savings on euro for euro to customers in the form of lower premiums. It would require the insurance industry to pass on information to the Central Bank outlining if and how it has passed on those savings. It is perfectly sensible legislation and I do not understand why the Minister of State is delaying this for nine months. It is a fiction. It is a way of avoiding supporting perfectly good Sinn Féin legislation that would help motorists, businesses and community organisations, and the Government should drop its amendment.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. It will benefit so many people, and I thank my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, for bringing it to the floor of the Dáil. The culture of insurance companies ripping off their customers is an issue with which we are all very familiar. This Bill seeks to change that culture and pass on the savings to customers because it is the right thing to do. Insurance companies have used rising claims to justify price hikes over recent years, but not passing the savings on to customers is unfair and unjust. It is the insurance industry moving the goalposts to protect its profits. The sector is speaking out of both sides of its mouth. Its only motivation seems to be crazy profits off the backs of people who cannot afford to pay what they are paying. The Bill seeks to make things better for drivers, businesses and homeowners who are being ripped off. Young people are being priced off the road. Childcare facilities are getting quoted out of existence or being refused insurance completely. The average working person is getting robbed by these companies, and this Bill in some way will change that. It is about fairness and protecting the consumer. It is time the industry was held to account and was transparent with the people. The Minister of State has to act. Kicking the can down the road is not in the interest of anybody except insurance companies.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Insurance companies have ripped off the public for too long. The insurance sector made profits of €142 million last year, yet premium prices kept increasing. This Sinn Féin legislation would force insurance companies to pass on savings to their customers and reduce premium prices as a result of new personal injury guidelines. A recent survey by Sinn Féin found that 58% of respondents had seen their premiums increase. This is despite the new guidelines. Our legislation forces the industry to outline to the Central Bank how it has passed on the savings to the public. Similar legislation has been enacted in Britain and governs the practices of all relevant companies there such as AIG, AXA, Aviva, Alliance and RSA, all of which operate in this country.

Dual pricing is another issue on which Deputy Doherty has done a lot of work. The practice was banned by the FCA last Friday yet continues here in Ireland. The British ruling affects both home and motor insurance. Dual pricing involves the overcharging of loyal customers on renewal premiums and can drive up prices by in the region of 35%. The Central Bank has recently investigated this practice in Ireland thanks to complaints submitted by Deputy Doherty and Sinn Féin and it found that the practice was widespread. It meant that “those customers with the longest tenure” were “paying the most”.

We need to see action on both these fronts. We need action now to outlaw these practices. The ball is firmly in the Government’s court, and any thoughts of delaying this are outrageous. There has been too much delay and there should be no more delays. It is time to act.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“Dáil Éireann resolves that the Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021 be deemed to be read a second time this day nine months, to allow for further consideration and analysis of how the Bill interacts with existing insurance data already collected by the Central Bank within the National Claims Information Database (NCID); and for such considerations to be taken into account in further scrutiny of the Bill.”.

This is the second Bill introduced by Deputy Doherty this year relating to insurance. In February, we had a fruitful debate on differential pricing, and I hope that this evening we can have an equally informative discussion. While there is no dispute that these two Bills attempt to address important issues, the Deputy must recognise that these two themes are part of this Government’s whole-of-government approach under the action plan for insurance reform, which we launched last December.

There has been considerable progress in delivering on these actions outlined in our action plan. A key achievement was the implementation of the new personal injuries guidelines in April. This was delivered seven months ahead of schedule, a timeframe we felt was reasonable. We are pleased that we are now seven months ahead of schedule and having this debate now because the Government passed the public injuries guidelines in this House some time ago. We are having this debate at this very early stage in the life of the Government as a result of our speedy action in dealing with a variety of matters under the action plan for insurance reform. These guidelines significantly reduce the award levels in a number of areas and will be used by both the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, and the Judiciary. Objectively, these guidelines should bring about reduced costs to customers, not anything contained in the Bill before the House. I stress that it is important for all sides of the House to recognise this fundamental point. The judicial guidelines will bring about the reductions. There is nothing whatever in this legislation - not a scintilla of a sentence or a syllable - to bring about reductions in the cost of insurance. The Bill refers to the production of a report. Based on what the Deputies have said so far, the publication of a report will not shame the insurance companies into reducing premiums. The sole purpose of the Bill is to produce a report insofar as it might shame the industry into doing something, which Deputies have discounted on several occasions this afternoon.

Both the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and I have been engaging directly with insurers to hold them to account in respect of commitments they have made to reflect savings arising from reduced award levels. This will continue over the course of the year to ensure a pass-through of the new guidelines continues to take effect, benefiting policyholders. I welcome that some of the firms have indicated to Oireachtas Members initial reductions on premium renewal as the new guidelines begin to take effect.

As for the Bill, the Government shares its objectives to increase transparency on insurance companies reducing premiums as a result of the personal injuries guidelines. At the heart of this debate is better understanding all the different costs that make up the price of premiums. It is important that these costs are not singled out as the silver bullet in solving all the problems in the sector but examined in their overall contribution to premium pricing. Ireland has a sophisticated transparency system in place to monitor insurance pricing and I welcome suggestions to improve it. My officials in the Department of Finance are actively exploring ways to do this and they will be taken into consideration along with the principles in this Bill when we bring forward legislation on the insurance sector in the autumn.

Regarding transparency, first, I wish to highlight that the Central Bank produces a national claims information database, which has been referred to, the equivalent of which is not available in most other EU countries. Second, it will produce its first ever report in this area on employer and public liability in June or July this year, which will be a major help to us in legislating. In addition, during July it will produce its review on differential pricing. We want to see the outcome of that review so we can incorporate what is necessary in the legislation we will bring forward in the autumn.

Third, the third annual report on motor insurance premiums will be produced in September. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, produces figures on insurance prices on a quarterly basis and the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, produces regular public reports. The likes of that organisation do not exist anywhere else. There is no PIAB in the UK producing public and transparent information on an annual basis. In addition, chief executives of several major insurance companies have appeared before the Oireachtas committee in recent weeks, which highlights the level of public scrutiny of this matter. In September, the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 will ensure that all insurance companies sending out renewals for motor insurance must give the five-year history of their insurance premiums. The level of transparency in Ireland is unparalleled in the EU and our neighbouring jurisdiction.

The Bill is concerned with oversight, with which we agree. That is what we will be doing as part of our legislation. I will not dwell on particular aspects of the Bill except to say that we will take on board in a positive manner the principles behind it when we are drafting legislation as part of the action plan for insurance.

Something else that will lead to cost reductions is combating the number of uninsured drivers on the road, which add at least €30 to every policy. Recently, we concluded public consultation on PIAB. Its like does not exist in any neighbouring country. We hope to have legislation on the reform of PIAB in the autumn. Recently, the Department of Justice completed a review of the Occupiers' Liability Act, including the duty of care and notices and waivers, in order to increase protections for consumers, businesses, sporting clubs and community groups. I understand that work is continuing on a formal proposal to the Government on proposed legislative changes in that regard. The Criminal Justice (Perjury and Related Offences) Bill 2018 recently passed all Stages in the Dáil and I hope that it will be passed by the Seanad shortly.

I have listed five or six elements that will contribute to a reduction in the cost of premiums. Passing legislation to isolate one element only while ignoring the other factors seems to demonstrate a limited understanding of the dynamics underpinning the cost of insurance. If the judicial guidelines were all that we were reliant on to reduce premiums, I could understand why we would consider this Bill. However, I have given one example of the myriad actions being taken by the Government. To isolate one element and ignore others that will also contribute to cost reductions does not reflect what is happening.

The approach the Bill uses to seek to hold insurers to account seems inadequate, as we already have a unique resource in this country, that being, the Central Bank's national claims information database, which provides a level of information that is not available in many other areas. We must wait for the three reports that will come from the Central Bank, not next year or this autumn, but this summer, so that a good and broad-based discussion on insurance can be enabled when we return in the autumn. Everyone would agree with that instead of believing that there is only one show in town and one silver bullet. We have many strings to our bow when it comes to dealing with this issue.

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There is a perception that the Bill simply reflects recent legislation passed in the UK, as mentioned this evening, and that, given that many insurers operate in both markets, providing the information in Ireland should not be an issue for them. However, the Bill goes much further than the UK requirements. It appears to be a much more cumbersome exercise than in the UK and ignores the fact that we already have a superior capacity to monitor claims costs and pricing trends through the national claims information database. We have a level of transparency that does not exist in other countries.

The forthcoming reports will feed into the work that is under way in the Department on considering a number of potential legislative measures relating to consumer matters, including the two Bills that the Deputy introduced in recent times. That said, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Government has developed a comprehensive whole-of-government action plan for insurance reform that addresses insurance issues in a structured and targeted manner and that we are already holding the insurance industry to account in terms of passing on savings arising from the reforms delivered to date.

I commend the amendment to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand that Deputy Kerrane is sharing time with her colleagues, Deputies Clarke, Mythen and Paul Donnelly.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important legislation. I listened to the Minister of State. Despite, as he puts it, holding the insurance companies to account, nothing that has been done by the Government has reduced premiums. Premiums are still increasing. That is the problem. It is a great shame that we must constantly force the insurance companies to do the right thing when it comes to costs for customers. Worse, the Government fails to act on behalf of those customers the length and breadth of the State. Why has the Government not stepped in to ensure that the savings made by insurance companies through the reduction of up to 50% in awards are passed on to customers? That is the reason we have had to step in with this legislation.

For years, insurance companies have been ripping off customers with rising premiums, making it more difficult for young people to get on the road, especially in rural areas. On turning 18 years of age last year, my brother received quotes of more than €3,000. That was on top of tax of €700 or €800 and the cost of running a car. Unless a person has money, it is impossible to get on the road, particularly in rural areas where public transport is either non-existent or inconvenient. Insurance companies have been lining their pockets and will do so even more now that they are saving money on awards while increasing premiums for no other reason than they can. This legislation will put a halt to that.

I heard what the Minister of State said about this Bill tackling just one element, but at least it would reduce premiums, which is not happening right now, and that is the problem. The Bill will ensure that savings to the insurance companies are passed on to customers. It will give young people a chance to get on the road and allow them to get from A to B, be that to a job or college. It will help workers and families that are constantly seeing their costs increase, for example, rent, childcare fees and household bills. It will give them a break and a little bit of fairness in terms of the cost of living.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Looking at the Government's proposal to read the Bill again in nine months' time, I cannot decide whether the Government is trying for "kick the can" champion

or is planning on passing off Deputy Doherty's homework as its own. The Minister of State believes that an industry whose practices have been exposed time and again by my colleague, Deputy Doherty, and which has been found to reward loyal customers by price gouging at the time of renewal, will voluntarily disclose the savings being made and pass them on. No one is that naive. The behaviour and practices of the insurance industry make the introduction of legislation now necessary. The time for good faith has passed. This legislation will hold the insurance industry to account, requiring it to demonstrate if and how it has passed on savings to customers. That requirement is applied to the same companies in the UK, where they are more than happy to comply.

I have countless constituents and businesses that rely entirely on insurance to earn a living. Thanks to the decades-long failure of policy and non-existent public transport in Longford-Westmeath, having a car is essential if one needs to get to work or college. Businesses are being priced out of existence. The Minister of State should come to Kilbeggan. I will introduce him to businesses that are no longer operating because of the cost of insurance.

The dogs on the street know that people are being taken advantage of. As one constituent put it to me, this was happening while the Government was doing less than nothing. Do not insult people's intelligence and expect them to believe that an industry that has taken advantage of them time and again, year in and year out, will step up and do the right thing.

7 o'clock

I do not believe that the Minister of State believes that himself so I ask him not to try to sell it here in this House or to the hard-working people who are being priced out of existence because of insurance premiums.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank Deputy Doherty for bringing this Bill forward. It is a culmination of intense research based on the principles of transparency, fairness and accountability. At the heart of this Bill is the protection of working people and their families. Any owner of a vehicle will say that their premiums over the last few years have increased, year in and year out, especially for young drivers who have been subject to extortionate quotes, where these quotes often exceed the value of the vehicle itself. This Bill gives this House the chance to correct and rein in this practice of gross profiteering and legally requires the insurance industry to supply information to the Central Bank to show categorically how claims have been reduced as a result of the new personal injury guidelines and, more importantly, how these savings will be reflected in premiums over the next four years and will be passed on directly to the customer.

We all know, as sure as night follows day, that if insurance companies are left to their own self-regulation, the full savings created by the new personal injury guidelines will not be passed on to the customers or the full empirical numbers for claims will not be made public.

In 2020, the Central Bank found that the average insurance premium increased by 35% in the last decade and that 2.5 million policyholders were overcharged by €187 million in a single year. This Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill is, therefore, so important because it legally requires the insurance industry to provide information to the Central Bank on the reduction of claims due to the new personal injury guidelines.

It also states that the Central Bank is legally bound to pass on that information to the Minister for Finance specifically stating that a report be brought before the Irish Parliament on an annual basis. This part is crucial as it will deliver a more robust, measurable, transparent and

accountable insurance industry that will benefit motorists, businesses and homeowners alike.

The Bill should be supported from across all sides of this House because it gives homeowners, businesses and motorists a fair deal for their hard-earned cash and will prevent any further gouging or dual-pricing, which will continue if we rely on the insurance industry to self-regulate. I thank my colleague Deputy Doherty for the extensive work he has done on this Bill. It is a pity that the Government has again capitulated to the insurance industry and conceded to the delaying of this good legislation for another nine months in its latest amendment.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The citizens of Ireland must be living in a different place from this Government. The young people of Ireland are definitely living in a different place because what the Minister of State explained in his statement to us bears no resemblance to what is happening on the ground. We have to end the insurance rip-off and reduce premiums for consumers.

The personal injuries guidelines which have been in place for over a month have significantly reduced the cost of claims for insurance companies. The insurance companies, however, are clearly not keeping their promise to reduce the costs of insurance. As stated earlier, the survey launched by Sinn Féin's spokesperson, Deputy Doherty, found that 58% of respondents who received their renewals since the new guidelines came into effect actually saw their premiums increase and only 22% saw them fall.

The insurance industry promised to reduce premiums for motorists and businesses significantly as a result of these guidelines. It is disgraceful that on the evidence so far these savings are not being passed on to their customers. This must happen. These insurance companies will do what one inspects and not what one expects. The days of wanting insurance companies to do the right thing are over. The Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill, as proposed by Deputy Doherty, will require the insurance industry to provide information to the Central Bank for each of the next four years outlining how the cost of claims has fallen as a result of the new personal injuries guidelines and if and how they passed these savings on to their consumers in the form of reduced prices. The legislation requires the Central Bank to report this information to the Minister for Finance with the report brought before each House of the Oireachtas annually. The insurance industry must be held to account and we must ensure that every cent that should be passed on is passed on to the young people who are being forced to pay thousands of euros every year in insurance costs. They are the people who are being ripped off, together with businesses. The insurance companies are the ones which are making mega-profits and this has to end.

It is important and it was noted earlier on that similar regulations are already in effect in Britain. These are not unique or unknown to the industry. I commend this Bill to the House.

Deputy Ged Nash: I am pleased to support this Bill. I will support any legislation or intervention from any Member of this House regardless of their political colour if it means that insurance premiums will be reduced for hard-pressed consumers in this country. We cannot wait another nine months for this issue to be addressed. I believe in the Minister of State's intentions. He is well intentioned in the approach he wishes to take with the insurance industry. Ultimately, that has to deliver, but we cannot waste any more time. We have to take any interventions that are made in this House seriously. We must try to take a consensual and unified approach to dealing with this very significant issue for Irish consumers, jobs and business.

For years insurance companies promised us that we would see a reduction in premiums

if court payment awards went down. While it might be early days, there is little evidence to suggest that premiums have gone down since the Judicial Council guidelines came in. In fact, there is evidence that I have come across in my own day-to-day work where some companies are just shifting the goalposts and introducing new criteria and thresholds to keep their profits up. This is the kind of activity that the Minister of State needs to keep a very close eye on, as do the Central Bank and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission.

All of this comes on the back of insurance firms, particularly those in the motor insurance market, refusing to grant rebates to their customers like they did at the start of the pandemic, despite the significant reduction in road usage and, as a consequence, claims in the early part of this year. This foot-dragging on premium reductions and rebates is simply unacceptable, but our experience of the insurance industry in this country means we should not be surprised. This is an industry with form. We all know that excessive awards were a problem to which the State responded but this was only part of a much larger problem. The reality, as was stated earlier and as we have been told by the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, is that motor insurance premiums increased by up to 35% between 2009 and 2019 while claims costs per policy fell 9% in the same period.

At the same time the operating profits of these price-gouging firms have continued to rise, for example, by 10% in 2019, while premiums have fallen by only an average of 4%. To add insult to injury, insurance companies are effectively pocketing State supports to businesses that the Minister of State and I, as taxpayers, are paying for. I refer to supports that all of us in this House legislated for. These companies are like the archetypal Second World War spivs, but in more expensive suits, who are trading off people's misfortune and exploiting a crisis to line their own pockets.

At last week's meeting of the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, my Labour Party colleague, Senator Sherlock, challenged the FBD, Aviva and Zurich insurance companies on this extraordinary situation, which is happening in plain sight. I have raised this with the Minister of State before, as have others, but it goes on.

Insurance companies are obliged by law to reimburse the State in any personal injuries awards in respect of any welfare payments that may have been made to the injured party. Despite the Minister of State's bellicose words on the airwaves, they get to make up their own rules when it comes to the treatment of business interruption insurance.

Only last week, we saw the State's biggest general insurance provider, AXA, stating it intends to deduct the value of pandemic State supports from payouts to businesses. They really have some neck and they need to be taken on. The Minister of State has rightly said it is not the job of the Government to subsidise the profits of the insurance companies, but he has a responsibility to call a halt to this travesty.

The issue of insurance cover for businesses is a ticking time bomb as we move to the recovery phase of our economic development, we hope, post Covid. In recent weeks, I have witnessed more and more insurance companies simply refusing to provide cover to businesses and, in some cases, even to firms that have never claimed. They have no history of claims or of issues whatsoever. Last week, Engineers Ireland spelled out in stark terms how the housing crisis could deepen because fire experts cannot get the proper insurance to allow them to sign off on individual houses, flats, nursing homes and entire housing estates.

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I am dealing with a shocking case in County Louth. I will not identify the individuals involved but I mention this because it is illustrative of a wider problem. A firm that employs almost ten people in the outdoors sector has, in effect, been closed because it cannot get standard insurance cover. The cover the firm has had since it opened, without a single claim having been made in the history of its operation. The jobs are at risk of going. This is an entrepreneur who has made it through the pandemic, only to be shown the door by an insurance company. Two issues have been cited, one of which is Brexit and the fact that there are difficulties with the underwriters, which are UK licensed and finding it difficult to operate in the EU. The second issue is the nature of the firm's business. I reiterate it has had no claims made against it and it operates to the highest safety standards, as its record shows.

If not tackled, this issue will stymie our recovery and put hundreds, if not thousands, of good businesses and good jobs at risk and out of operation. Today, the Government launched its national economic recovery plan. Many of the initiatives outlined therein are simply rehashed initiatives that have been lodged in any case since the Government came into office, although it would be churlish of me not to recognise that there are some positive initiatives in the document, notwithstanding the criticisms I have of some elements of it. Nevertheless, there is one step that would greatly enhance the prospects of businesses' viability, namely, tackling all these deep-seated inequities and injustices in the insurance sector and the way in which businesses are treated.

The shocking case that I outlined I am dealing with is illustrative of a wider problem. We have a fundamental market failure in insurance in this country and it is holding back our economic development and our society. Where there is market failure, an activist State ought to step in. We recently proposed the introduction of innovative pooled insurance schemes, the norm in other EU countries, which would allow community services such as childcare centres, co-operatives and sports clubs to group together under one policy to secure significantly cheaper premium and to spread and share the risk. That is normal elsewhere, but we do not seem to be able to do it in this country. We have also called on local authorities and education and training boards, for example, to use their ownership of Irish Public Bodies Mutual Insurance to extend cover to community events and festivals, which will be absolutely necessary if we are to help our vibrant arts and entertainment sector bounce back from the pandemic.

The State must step in actively to reshape the insurance market in the interest of customers, communities and local businesses. In the meantime, we are happy to support this initiative, designed as it is to force down premiums. We will support any initiative, regardless of where in the House it might come from, that is designed to achieve what we all want, namely, reduce premiums and costs for businesses, save jobs and give consumers a fair crack.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The lack of affordability of insurance in this country has been a hot topic for many years and the source of much annoyance and anger for consumers. High insurance premiums add significantly to the cost base of our economy. As premiums go up and up, this plays directly into the increase in the cost of living. Affordable insurance, therefore, is fundamental to the long-term interests of our society and communities, not least in regard to protecting and creating jobs.

One does not have to look far to see how astronomical premiums have impacted on communities and individuals. As premiums increase, small businesses can be pushed out of the market by the crippling overheads they face, including in particular the cost of insurance. Let us not forget the major crisis that befell our childcare sector at the end of 2019, when hundreds

of crèches faced closure due to the lack of affordability of insurance.

Before Covid-19 changed the landscape for summer festivals, they were already under threat from rocketing insurance premiums. One such festival that came forward about increasing costs was the Ballina Salmon Festival, whose premium increased from €6,500 in 2016 to €25,000 in 2019. The festival, which had been running for 65 years, finally had to shut because it had become completely unaffordable to take out insurance. When premiums are sky high, local services are forced to close their doors, businesses can fail, jobs can be lost and community groups can no longer afford to put on events. This has a considerable impact, not only on the economy but also on our community, yet despite the often devastating impact of high premiums, costs continue to rise. We know this. It is not news to anyone in the Chamber and it is long past time the Government sorted this out.

Why does Ireland face such high insurance costs? There have been many attempts to explain this away. Today we are debating the claim that awards are too high, which insurance companies maintain leads to spiralling premiums. I am not saying that high awards do not contribute significantly to high premiums - there is a certain logic and evidence behind that - but what we saw over recent years was a very successful portrayal by insurance companies of these high awards being a primary contributor to the cost of premiums. This argument has passed the buck, so to speak, onto judges and their legal system and, in doing so, effectively absolved the industry of responsibility.

The insurance industry heavily lobbied for new personal injury guidelines to replace the book of quantum. Its efforts were successful and these new guidelines took effect on 24 April. In its lobbying efforts, the industry was adamant that these guidelines would lead directly to a fall in insurance costs, and in some cases, a drop of up to 20%. It is worth noting that a number of judges, including the former President of the High Court, Mr. Justice Peter Kelly, have on record expressed scepticism as to whether lower awards would result in lower premiums. Serious doubts have been raised among the Judiciary about any benefit to policyholders, while the Law Society of Ireland has stated that the guidelines “swing the pendulum too far” in favour of insurers. The industry maintained that these new guidelines were necessary. Now that they have come into effect, policyholders need to see a return in the form of lower premiums - end of story.

The Bill aims to hold insurance companies to account for those promises by requiring them to report to the Central Bank in respect of how the guidelines have affected the cost of insurance.

The Social Democrats will be supporting this Bill. It is not a silver bullet for the many issues within the insurance industry, nor does it claim to be. However, it seeks to hold companies to account for their promises to lower premiums, if payouts are reduced. For that, we welcome this Bill. Oversight is desperately needed and this Bill aims to provide that.

Reform of the insurance sector is long overdue. While the Central Bank has begun to produce statistics and investigate the basis on which insurers have been increasing premiums, we cannot be satisfied it is sufficiently consumer-focused in its approach. It does not collect enough basic data, especially on premiums, and is not active enough in terms of vulnerable customers or market concentration and volatility.

How can we pinpoint the root of Ireland’s high insurance premiums without sufficient data

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to understand the entire picture? We have heard a plethora of theories about high awards, fraud and exaggerated claims, but without the data we cannot address the areas which need reform and legislation. Where are the facts? Where is the evidence to support the industry's claim that high awards are principally to blame?

Ireland is often blamed for having a claims culture. This is what the insurance companies have told us to gain support for the personal injuries guidelines. Let us look at the numbers. There was a big rise in personal injuries awards between 2007 and 2016. They nearly tripled. However, since 2016, the number and value of awards processed by PIAB has fallen year on year. There has been a decrease of 11% in the number of awards and of 18% in the value of awards since 2016.

Let us look at one insurance category. In 2019, motor insurance accounted for 70% of personal injury assessments. From 2009 to 2019, motor insurance premiums rose by 35%, according to the Central Bank's annual private motor insurance report. It is a staggering figure. What if we look at liability across categories of insurance? Looking across motor, employer and public liability insurance categories, data from PIAB again show a decrease in each category, in the average value of awards, from 2018 to 2019.

There is little proof that high premiums can be directly attributed to high awards. We need more data to understand what is driving these skyrocketing insurance costs. My party has been asking, for some time, for a new consumer affairs committee to be established within the Oireachtas, with its sole focus to be outcomes for consumers across the board. Regulators should expect to have to answer far more regularly for their actions or, in many cases, their inactions. A committee could play a valuable role in bringing about accountability, as well as highlighting where there are gaps in the legislation or deficiencies in the powers available to regulators.

The bottom line is that insurance premiums are crippling for consumers, small businesses and community groups. The cost of insurance is a huge overhead for businesses and these exorbitant costs are passed on to consumers. Ireland was recently ranked sixth, in terms of the high cost of living, in Europe and 12th in the world this year. Our high cost of insurance directly contributes to the high cost of living for individuals and families. It directly impacts the quality of local communities, shuttering businesses and local services and forcing community groups to cancel events because they cannot pay the spiralling cost of insurance premiums.

Today's Bill will not fix all insurance issues but it makes a serious effort to hold the industry to account for its promises. I warmly welcome it for that reason. I commend Deputy Doherty on bringing this Bill forward and on his tenaciousness in pursuing the significant problems in the insurance industry, which the Government should have solved long ago.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is Deputy Murphy sharing time?

Deputy Verona Murphy: I am sharing time with Deputy Matt Shanahan, who is probably on his way. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward the Bill. I commend Deputy Doherty on all of the work he has done, over many years, in highlighting issues in our insurance industry. He has brought to light many important issues and has been relentless in his efforts to try to deal with them.

This Bill would require insurance companies to provide information to the Central Bank for each of the next four years, outlining how the cost of claims have fallen as a result of the

new personal injury guidelines. I support this idea. It is one way of helping us to understand how effective the personal injury guidelines have been. Too often, the impact of policy is not analysed enough. Guidelines or rules are often just introduced and it is assumed that they will achieve the intended results.

It is important that when changes to anything are introduced, we have mechanisms in place to help us to judge whether the changes have been effective. It may also help guide us towards any future amendments which need to be made or any additions which need to be made to the personal injury guidelines.

It will also serve the purpose of monitoring companies and prices to see if and how they have passed these savings onto their consumers, in the form of reduced prices. In my previous role as president of the Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA, we found trying to tackle the insurance issue was like banging your head off a brick wall, because the competition authority was reluctant to tackle the issue. It wanted masses of evidence before it would consider taking action, yet no such evidence was available because the insurance companies were not required to publish it.

Another aspect of insurance reform that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency is the issue of test cases. The UK financial regulator takes test cases to court on behalf of a certain sector and the result of that case becomes the precedent or benchmark for all other similar cases. However, in Ireland, each individual has to pay €5,000 to take his or her claim to the commercial court. This is unacceptable. It makes it more difficult for businesses or individuals to legally challenge insurance companies. Many publicans are in this position. We need to update the role of our Financial Regulator to have it take test cases in a similar way to the UK. After all, the Financial Regulator is there to serve the public. Many small enterprises or individuals do not have the financial resources to take an insurance company to court and this will be even more problematic, since many business have been closed for the past 14 months.

As this Bill relates to insurance, it is important to note that thousands of people are unable to get on the road due to delays in our driver testing. We hope motorists will have cheaper motor insurance costs, but we also need to ensure that people can get on the road. The Road Safety Authority, RSA, and the National Driver Licence Service, NDLS, have been lax in bringing back theory tests, driving lessons and driving tests. All of the inaction serves to undermine any savings which could be garnered from insurance reform, as well as preventing those out of work from availing of job prospects, particularly in rural Ireland.

I have constantly called on the RSA to bring in an online portal for the theory test. When it did bring it in, it only suited one quarter of the computer users because of the chosen software. When one tries to apply, one discovers there is no test available until 2023. If these new personal injury guidelines result in people being charged less for insurance, that is great news, but it is not that useful to someone who cannot get themselves up and running because of delays in other areas. While that is a tangent from the contents of this Bill, it illustrates the lack of joined-up thinking in the system. Overall, I believe it is important to have transparency in our insurance industry. Insurance companies make billions of euro in profits as a result of governments making insurance a legal requirement in certain aspects of life. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable that we have transparency, careful monitoring and protections for the consumer.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The Bill speaks not just to fairness and transparency, but also to equitable justice and national competitiveness. It is an attempt to hold insurance companies to

account, in the first instance, and associated intermediaries, in the second. The legislation calls for significant data available from the Central Bank to be provided in a clear format so we can assess the insurance reform measures proposed in recent months to see if they are having the desired effect in the market.

This House has been debating for some years the dysfunction in the insurance sector. This has been demonstrated recently, when the year-on-year rising claims market has been largely passed onto an unsuspecting public and business sector, with little or no rigorous examination by industry of the underlying cultures or environment driving insurance premiums in Ireland. The recent findings of the Judicial Council have been adopted by insurers and the Judiciary to operate a new soft tissue awards profile, which offers a 50% reduction in soft tissue claims compared to previous levels. It is worth noting that, at this award base, like-for-like injuries are still 30% less than UK peer insurance groupings. This situation becomes even more interesting when one considers the majority of insurance companies operating in Ireland are under UK incorporation, where one assumes they have been operating profitably, despite the lower claims environment there and the lower premiums they exact in a far more competitive market.

The Bill seeks to ensure the reduction in insurance premiums that is expected to result from reducing extravagant and bogus injury claims will be passed on to customers and should be immediately evidenced in 2021 by a reduction in premiums of at least 20% on the previous year. Despite significant talk of reform, the insurance market in Ireland is dominated by a small number of key players whose underwriting is largely confidential. Although much was made in the past 12 months of the cost of bogus injury claims by industry, there was next to no evidence of criminal proceedings being taken for false claims.

I say as a member of the Regional Group included in the claims environment that there must be a propensity for perjury. The Regional Group has advocated legislation begun by Pádraig Ó Céidigh and hopes to see the benefits, with criminal sanctions being pursued for perjury when it is evident in court. Even with this additional measure, without rigorous year-on-year analysis of the claims environment, legal costs and premiums resulting, we can have no expectations based on past performance that insurers will pass on the full benefits of savings or that such savings may not be consumed in further legal activity costs.

As part of the strategy to curb legal costs in personal injuries insurance claims, the work of the PIAB must be recognised and respected. This body allows people with soft tissue injuries to access legal services and adequate redress without the need to initiate significant legal challenges. The majority of claims for personal injuries of a low order can be dealt with in the District Court, where legal fees are capped at €3,500 and injury claims are capped at up to €15,000.

There has been some disquieting commentary recently on the possible attachment of post-traumatic stress disorder syndromes to future soft tissue personal injury claims. This would open a vista of actions proceeding to the Circuit or High Courts where awards and legal fees that can be expected are a multiple of those in the District Court. I endorse the right of somebody who has suffered a significant injury to claim sufficient and even exemplary damages when negligence is proven but it is known that we already demonstrate a high volume of litigation in comparison to European peers. This is a metric that must be reviewed year-on-year, along with the future analysis sought by this motion.

Insurance cover was always meant to offer a defence for injury and damage resulting from the unexpected. In recent years in Ireland, however, we have created the expectancy that every

risk is unavoidable and every resulting injury the responsibility of anyone in the vicinity with adequate insurance cover to sustain a claim. Insurance cover has become a massive burden for many businesses and individuals and is doing enormous damage to our national competitiveness and the social fabric. Insurance fraud is theft, as is price gouging on vulnerable payers.

To the degree this can be analysed, I welcome what the Bill supports. Despite what the Government has put forward, I hope we will see scrutiny and analysis of Central Bank data over the coming months to tell us whether the reforms that have been recently adopted are having any effect on the market.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Moving on to the Rural Independent Group, there are four speakers. Deputy Michael Collins is first.

Deputy Michael Collins: We should not let the insurance industry off the hook. It should be held to account. We need to verify that reductions and awards facilitated in personal injury cases by the House of the Oireachtas are passed on euro for euro to consumers in order that policyholders see a reduction in their premiums as they take out insurance. Those savings must be passed on to customers in the form of lower prices. There must be no excuses. We have spent years and years discussing this matter here and it is falling on deaf ears. I fully support the Bill brought forward by Sinn Féin.

We saw during Covid how businesses were left high and dry with no insurance to cover them for closures. The way publicans were treated was nothing short of scandalous. Their businesses were and continue to be ruined and wrecked by Government. The insurance companies tried every which way to get out of it and it was like a scam in its own right until they were held to account by the courts. Some of them were trying to defend themselves after that again. They remind me a bit of An Taisce. They throw in appeal after appeal and, when they lose a case, they keep coming back again. The insurance companies are ruthless in their attempts to destroy people instead of working with people. I am very annoyed at the way insurance companies have worked.

We also saw the debacle with insurance related to the flooding in west Cork, including Bantry, Skibbereen, Bandon, Rathbarry and Rosscarbery. People had property insured but when they get flooded once, they will never again get insurance. The Government brought in a compensation package for businesses. That package should have covered businesses, regardless of whether they had insurance. I know of hotels in Skibbereen and many businesses in Bantry that were destroyed. It is crazy that some that had insurance could not get the compensation package and some of those that had insurance are still holding out. I met a businessperson over the weekend who still has not been paid by the insurance company. He told me they do not know whether they will get the business up and running again. Young drivers all over the country are being quoted enormous amounts. These young people cannot afford that. The Government has to come in here.

On a different issue completely, I met with the west Cork credit unions yesterday. The Minister of State is in charge of credit unions and I would appreciate if he would act quickly. Credit unions in west Cork, and others, are in a desperate situation.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank Deputy Doherty for bringing forward the Bill and compliment him on his relentless challenge to the racket in insurance. I wish the Minister of State well. He is a decent man and will try his best but I am disappointed tonight that he is buying

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another nine months for the insurance companies to rob us blind. Why would they not when the Government has let them off? This has been going on for decades. We have seen it in this episode with Covid. Publicans who have business interruption insurance ring me every day and the insurance companies use every rule in the book to keep from paying, such as the fact there was not an outbreak in the public house itself. It is blackguarding.

I operate on the principle of “Ní neart go cur le chéile”. We are all in this together. We were not all in this together. Big businesses have cleaned up during this Covid pandemic over the past 14 months. Insurance companies had no claims going on because pubs and many other businesses were closed and they gave a miserly couple of euro off. In some cases, it was €40 out of a €7,000 premium. Now they are pressurising them to get their insurance renewed. They give them 21 days and if they do not go with them, they will be penalised again. It is a shocking cartel out there with price gouging and everything else.

Young people are trying to get on the road, but face the ineptitude of the RSA and the NDLS and the carry-on there. There are 100,000 people waiting to get going. How will we get our economy recovering? Pass-through charges are extortionate. One hotelier was charged €30,000 while his hotel was closed. It is a racket. Big businesses can do what they like. In this case it is insurance but it is all across the way. I raised during Leaders’ Questions last week the way things are stacked against small business and the young person trying to get on the road. I know there are some fictitious claims, but they have been rooted out. I compliment the Regional Group on bringing forward the Bill introduced by former Senator Pádraig Ó Céidigh. We must act. We cannot wait for another nine months, as suggested in the amendment, because people are being drained of their very lifeblood by insurance companies who refuse to pay.

I salute the four gallant publicans in Dublin who took the case, but like my colleague Deputy Collins said, it is not happening. They have not been paid. The insurance companies are just prevaricating, stalling and stonewalling. They cannot say “No”. They are friends of Fianna Fáil. They are friends of Fine Gael and the Government is now supported by the Green Party. They support each other and to hell with na daoine óga and na daoine beaga.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank and compliment Deputy Doherty and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this very important topic for debate tonight. I acknowledge the presence of the Minister of State, who is a decent and honourable man. We wish him nothing but good luck in his role. We will be relying on him 100%. The problem is as outlined in the Bill. We want to bring down the cost of claims and we want to give the savings back to the customers. Young people are paying enormous sums trying to get on the road. Young boys and young girls want to get the wheels underneath them and to get on the road to earn a living, go to work and do what they have to do in their lives.

We have serial complainants. I have no problem in the world with people claiming if there is a serious accident or if something happens, but one thing that should happen in the courts is that a person’s previous history of what I call “misfortune” should be taken into account, in other words, if they seem to find holes in the road to fall into or if they seem to continuously be bumping and humping into people along the road and claiming. Why does that not come out during the course of a court case? Why is a person’s record not laid bare to see if he or she has previous claims? If somebody is continuously claiming, there is something continuously wrong. We have had situations in places such as Kenmare and Sneem where businesses were flooded. Sometimes people find it awfully difficult to get insurance again afterwards. We must be able to take on such situations and make sure businesses can get insurance and that they can

be up and running and have proper cover.

With regard to bringing down the cost of claims, one thing to do is ensure that there is due vigilance and when claims are made that they conform to the rigour of the law. If an individual gets an amount for one type of damage in England or in any part of Europe, why should a person be able to get double the money here? I am not trying to make little of it but a person often got a lot worse than a soft tissue injury or a sore neck on a football field or playing hurling and he or she managed to keep going afterwards and there was nothing about it. Why is it that in Ireland there seems to be this game of going to the courts? It is like an industry in itself. That is wrong. It should not be allowed. Somebody has to pay. There is no such thing as a free lunch. It is the customer who is paying and I want to stand up for those customers here tonight.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am grateful to Deputy Doherty and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this very important Bill. All of us have spoken so many times before about the insurance industry and the unfairness that is going on. Those who drive taxis, buses, and commercial lorries are all penalised, as are businesses such as publicans and young people who have done nothing wrong. They deserve to get a chance, but they honestly do not. They have not been getting a chance and I am afraid they will not get a chance. When elderly people and young people have cars that exceed ten years of age the insurance companies invariably tell them they cannot be insured. They will not insure them even though they have a valid NCT or MOT. What is missing out of the frame is that the insurance companies have a monopoly. Whatever they say about Mr. Quinn, we were able to pay for insurance when he was there, but now whatever they get is not enough.

The big worry for many people and businesses is that they will not even get a quote for next year. That is very wrong. They are people who are employing others and who have done very little wrong. I see what insurance companies are doing. They are paying out and not contesting claims at all. One insurance company told me it would have to give money to a man because he was a customer of the company's as well. He did not deserve money. That is the truth of it. He did not deserve what he got, but someone had to pay a dear claim and it put up his insurance because of the actions of the insurance companies.

It is very evident to me that the insurance companies and the banks are destroying young people. They are not giving them a chance to either put a roof over their heads or to put a car on the road. Young people are entitled to get a chance to go on the road and if they blot their copybook, then peg the book at them but give them a chance to go on the road, which they are not getting.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I fully support the Bill and what it intends to do. I pay tribute to Deputy Doherty for bringing it forward because it is necessary and important to do so. The Bill intends to ensure that the Central Bank is informed by insurance companies on the effect of the personal injury requirements on insurance. We all know that insurance is a statutory requirement that everybody needs to have but, in reality, insurance companies use it as an excuse. As soon as a claim becomes possible, they try to get out of it. That is the reality of the situation.

Unfortunately, because of the system we have in the Dáil, Opposition Members cannot introduce Bills that make real change. I imagine this Bill could be a lot stronger and could be introduced in a way to make real changes to how the insurance system works. I welcome the Government's acceptance of the Bill, but it is kicking it down the road for nine months. What does the Government hope will happen in that nine months? In recent months we have seen

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the Government accept most Private Members' Bills and motions that have been introduced. Is the Government afraid of seeing the figures go up when the vote takes place? Rather than the Government getting a kicking on social media and in the press for voting down the legislation, it has decided to kick it down the road for nine months on the basis that it will probably die on Committee Stage or it can be finished off in some way that will attract less publicity and look better for the Government. The Government wants to look good by accepting everything: to show it wants to help everybody by taking something on board.

I do not know if this is parliamentary language, but it is basically a load of crap. I would have more respect for the Government if it would stand up and say why it is opposing something or why it thinks something is not working or could not work. Why does the Government not come straight out and say that what it wants to do is ensure that insurance companies in this case have an easy ride, so that they can make money and keep it in the system as quickly as possible, and they do that on the backs of those in society who must have insurance because people cannot go on the road or open a business unless they have insurance? Why does the Government not say its role is to make it as smooth as possible for insurance companies in order to keep them here? That is really what is happening.

The system has been exposed big time through the pandemic. Insurance companies included pandemic insurance as an add-on to make their insurance look far better than what anybody else was offering, but as soon as it happened they tried to find an excuse not to pay compensation. People had to take cases and go to court. The cases are going through the courts now and people have won. Insurance companies will not offer pandemic insurance from this point on because they know there is a chance they could get caught. They will find something else to offer as a marketing tool. That is sad but it is the reality of the situation and it will not change while this Government is in power.

I spoke earlier about the Government accepting motions. I moved the Thirty-Seventh Amendment of the Constitution (Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) Bill during Private Members' business some months ago calling for a referendum to put those rights in the Constitution, including a constitutionally protected right to housing. Rather than vote it down, and even though we know the Government is not in favour of that, it decided that the Bill would be read two years later. That makes it look like the Government supports it but after two years, when the Bill comes up on Committee Stage, I will be pushing it big-time and we will see then if the Government is actually in favour of it. I do not think it will be and it will look to kill it off completely. A number of weeks ago, I tabled a Private Members' motion on the Common Agricultural Policy, how to make it work for small farmers across rural Ireland, in Donegal, Mayo and along the west coast, and how European money could be used to benefit all of them. The Government accepted the motion which, at the time, was a tribute to it, or so we thought. Now, however, we discover there is a call for an emergency motion in the House because the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine is in Europe, negotiating the Common Agricultural Policy in order to undo what this House agreed to do and said should be done a few weeks ago. That is the nonsensical nature of this whole process and it shows up what the Government is trying to do. It is kicking it further down the road and making sure it does not have to make a decision, but it does not want to appear that it is voting against these motions. It is sad that is the level at which the Government is going to pursue it. I think I am right. The Government might argue I am not but if I am, time will tell.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth): I thank Deputies for an engaging discussion on the issue of insurance reform. It is

clear we all agree on the need for ongoing work to improve both the affordability and availability of all types of insurance. That is the Government's policy intention and that is why we published the action plan for insurance reform in December to drive this agenda forward. While the Government appreciates what the Deputy is trying to achieve with this Bill, it is still not clear from this debate what added value the Bill could provide beyond what the national claims information database currently offers in monitoring claims costs and premium prices. A single Bill cannot be seen as holding the insurance industry to account. Instead, there must be ongoing engagement by the Government's Cabinet committee subgroup and the insurance industry, as well as other stakeholders representing civic society, business and consumers, to ensure that any savings are being passed on. This is the approach Government is driving from the centre.

This Bill will do nothing to help the average consumer or business when they are purchasing insurance. The Government is interested in implementing real reforms which bring tangible benefits. The approach proposed in this Bill is merely a data collecting exercise, an administrative burden and an additional cost on insurers that will only show what alternative data sources already illustrate, namely, whether prices are falling or rising. Whether this is attributable to the personal injuries guideline changes and what premiums may have been in the absence of these guidelines is quite academic. What is clear is that progress in this area needs to be multi-pronged and involve a cross-departmental policy approach. In time, we will be able to draw our own clear, evidence-based conclusions from future national claims information database reports as to the impact of the new guidelines on insurance premiums, along with other aspects of the Government's reform agenda.

The availability of insurance is crucial for businesses, in particular as we emerge from the pandemic and begin rebuilding the economy. The Government has provided unprecedented support to those businesses over the past year and we expect insurers to play their role as society starts to reopen. Even before Covid-19, Brexit and a tightening in the global markets for certain types of insurance, such as professional indemnity insurance, had started creating supply pinch point issues here and worldwide. As the Minister of State with responsibility for Government procurement, I have seen the impact of this, particularly in the construction sector. One of the Government's key aims is to promote competition in the insurance market here, and that includes attracting new providers to enter. Unfortunately, this Bill will not assist in either of those aims. Indeed, if we do not succeed in getting the balance correct, it could send out a message that runs counter to those very objectives.

I note from the debate, and from media coverage over the weekend, reference to a survey hosted on the Sinn Féin website, which indicates that 58% of the 1,363 respondents who received their renewal since the new guidelines came into effect saw their premiums increase. While some customers may still see increases in their motor insurance premium, perhaps because of their individual circumstances, we need to be cautious in drawing conclusions from these figures as it is simply too early to do so. The Minister for Justice is to make a report to Government by the end of this year assessing the impact of the guidelines. Official data have shown that prices have been declining for some time. Accordingly, these findings are at odds with official data published by the CSO and the Central Bank.

While the Opposition may feel that it has had a monopoly on introducing insurance legislation, I remind the House a large volume of insurance legislation has been introduced by Government in recent years, particularly arising from the cost of insurance working group's recommendations. These include the Central Bank (National Claims Information Database) Act 2018 to increase transparency around insurance costs and claims; the Insurance (Amend-

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ment) Act 2018 to enhance the insurance compensation fund framework to protect third-party motor claimants in the event of an insurance firm failure; the Judicial Council Act 2019, which provides for a Judicial Council setting new personal injury guidelines in place of the current book of quantum; and the Personal Injuries Assessment Board (Amendment) Act 2019 to enhance the PIAB and provide for amendments to the Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004 to make it easier for businesses to challenge cases where fraud or exaggeration is suspected. In addition, the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 was introduced with the assistance of the Government and Deputies across all parties. I remind Deputy Doherty that a number of substantial amendments were introduced by the Government to make that particular legislation workable and that remaining provisions will be commenced in September. All of these legislative measures, I contend, represent a solid record of legislative action in this critically important sector.

I assure the House that there has been substantial engagement with insurers in recent months. The Tánaiste and a range of Ministers from all Government parties were actively involved in the matter. The key stakeholders have been met and the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, has recently concluded a series of engagements with the main firms. In these, he raised the need for the industry to respond to both the Government's ongoing reforms, in particular the new guidelines, and the Covid-19 pandemic by lowering premiums and continuing to offer forbearance measures. These were undertaken in a positive manner, with many insurers indicating they intended to reduce premiums in response to the new guidelines. This was confirmed to Oireachtas Members as recently as last week. Further ministerial meetings will take place later this year to review progress in that regard.

In conclusion, the amendment seeking to have the Bill read a Second Time in nine months is the correct course of action. We should not lose sight of the fact the Government has developed a comprehensive, whole-of-government action plan for insurance reform that addresses insurance issues in a structured, targeted manner, and we are holding the insurance industry to account in regard to passing on savings arising from reforms delivered to date. In addition, we will examine whether existing tools such as the national claims information database can be used to do this more effectively. This will feed into work under way within the Department of Finance on considering a number of potential legislative measures in regard to consumer matters, including issues that were discussed this evening. Accordingly, we are not supporting the moving of this Bill and, instead, we seek that the matter be considered again by the House in nine months after important work has been done.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I wish to share time with Deputy Quinlivan.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank Teachta Pearse Doherty for all of the work he has done, not just on this important legislation, but on the area of insurance.

8 o'clock

He has been rightly recognised here this evening by those who care to pay attention to exactly what is happening.

I listened with interest to the Minister of State. I often think how when Ministers come in and read scripts, it can really sound like they are reading them for the first time. I wonder to whether they believe all the stuff that is in the text. The Minister of State indicated that a single item of legislation will not hold the industry to account. Of course it will not, but doing noth-

ing will definitely not lead to the industry being held to account. I was fascinated to hear the multi-pronged approach that the Minister of State just outlined because it does not seem to be having an impact. Instead of reading from scripts, what Teachta Doherty and we have done is talk to people. Some 58% of the people who responded to the survey said that their premiums have gone up. When people say the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the eating of the pudding shows that the premiums are going up. It is not good enough to say we should wait or add another prong to the multi-pronged approach or we should try to put another name on it - what people need and want is action.

I am talking about people in my constituency who work in tourism-dependent industries and experience-type industries and who cannot afford to insure their businesses. I am talking about young people who, because of poor transport infrastructure, have absolutely no choice but to have a car to be able to get on the road. Those people do not want to wait and they should not have to wait nine months for another prong to be added or for there to be more deliberations or whatever it is that the Minister of State is doing because it is not working. People want concrete action that will achieve results. I talk to businesses and they are wary and fearful about reopening. The last thing they need to see is their insurance premiums going up. I urge the Government to think about the people who are affected, withdraw the nonsensical amendment, work with Teachta Doherty who has the support of people in the House and the credibility and track record and start to deliver for people who need to see their premiums come down.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank my colleague, Deputy Doherty, for bringing forward the Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill. The work he has done to tackle the artificially high premiums has been tremendous. If adopted this Bill will have a really positive impact on insurance customers across the State. I was disappointed to hear the responses from both Ministers of State. When I lived in America, people would use the phrase “mañana, mañana”, which means tomorrow, or we will basically do nothing. The nine months mentioned by the Minister of State suggests that he is stalling again, kicking the can down the road. We accept that we need insurance for myriad reasons, and there are associated costs and we presume this cost will be fair. What is not acceptable is the artificially high premiums and the failure to pass on savings and damage awards to loyal customers.

On 24 April, the personal injuries guidelines came into effect. They reduce the cost of damages awarded by insurance companies. These guidelines reduce the cost of pay outs for personal injury claims by between 31% and 69%. In the month or so since these guidelines came into effect, the premiums paid by consumers remained high and less than a quarter of consumers have seen their premium reduce. It is worth reminding ourselves that when the insurance companies were before the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Reform and Taoiseach in 2019, they committed to reducing premiums if damages to personal injuries were reduced. They have not done this. It was suggested that if damages were reduced by 50%, motor insurance and business insurance would fall by an average of 15% to 20%, respectively. This has not happened. The promise to reduce premiums has yet to come to pass. We cannot rely on insurance companies to pass these savings on to their customers without pressure. Had they wanted to, they would have done so already by reducing premiums. We must take steps to ensure that these savings are passed on to people. Rather than sit back and hope that insurance companies act in the interest of consumers as that has been the approach of successive Governments with little reward, Sinn Féin is introducing this Bill which would benefit motorists, homeowners and business owners. It will create the conditions where much fairer pricing can be provided to insurance customers who for too long have been overcharged for their premiums.

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Our nearest neighbours in Britain have similar regulations, with many of the same insurance companies operating in both jurisdictions. If we were interested, we could sort out this issue if we wanted to.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank all the Deputies who spoke in tonight's debate on this legislation and all those who had kind words for myself and my party's campaign on insurance costs. There was reference earlier to the Government trying to steal my homework. I do not give a damn which Minister takes any of the work that I have done and runs with it. They can have it all, they can have this Bill, the dual pricing legislation - they should go and do it, run with it, but do not delay it. I was taken aback by the contribution by the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth. It was mind-blowing because it was basically saying "You're not as great as you think you are". I do not care. I have only one agenda, and that is to drive down insurance costs. That is all this is about. He said that this legislation will do nothing. He says after tonight's debate he still does not understand what is required. Let me spell it out to him, after his very embarrassing contribution to the House. This legislation is based on what the existing companies in Ireland, AXA, AIG, Aviva, Alliance, Zurich and RSA, have to do in the North and in Britain. In Britain they gave a commitment that if awards were reduced, they would pass on the savings pound for pound to the customers. In this State, they gave the finance committee the same assurances in 2019. There is absolutely no way that we can ever know if that commitment is being delivered on. Why? It is because although the national claims information database collects a great deal of information from insurance companies, there is a crucial piece of information that it does not have the power to collect, namely: what would the premiums be if these new guidelines did not come into effect; and what level of awards would be paid out by the insurance industry if these new guidelines did not come into effect. That is what these insurance companies have to do, audited by an independent auditor and provided to the central bank, the Bank of England. That is what this legislation demands of them to do. That means the Government holds them to account.

We can find out whether they are delivering on their promise. We may see some companies reduce premiums by 8% or maybe 12% or 14% but nobody in this House will ever have an idea whether that was actually passing on the full amount of the reduction in awards that was enabled through the passing of the Judicial Council Act. If the Minister of State did not understand it, perhaps he understands it now. This is a serious piece of legislation, which, thankfully, the Alliance for Insurance Reform is backing. I welcome the work it has done with all parties across this House on reforming the insurance industry and driving down the cost of insurance. This is not a gimmick. This is about making sure that prices that should have been reduced for every single motorist who did not have a claim or who did not change their policy. They should have seen a reduction after the implementation of these guidelines on 24 April. The Minister of State said that the survey we conducted was out of kilter. I was talking to a Deputy earlier who said it was a pity he had not had speaking time because he had just got his insurance renewal and the price had increased by €100. This is what is happening in the real world and we are letting the industry off the hook.

Earlier, the Minister of State from Fianna Fáil said that this is one element and it would be naive to think it was a magic bullet which was going to fix everything. I never said that. He went on to list reports, and say that we had to wait for reports. One report was on dual pricing. It was the result of a super-claim that I made in 2019 to the Central Bank that actually instigated that report. Two reports we already got, the final one in July. Then he talked about the coming into effect of the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019, whereby people will be able to see

their claims and premiums over the last five years. Again, that is legislation I drafted, specifically that section, and brought into effect in 2019 but the two Ministers of State here have been delaying its implementation in the interim. It will not come into force until September. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, went on to state that the national claims information database will have public liability information. That is hugely welcome, and I argued for in 2019 when the legislation was being passed, and should not be delayed. Then he said we would have crucial information when more information relating to motor insurance is published by the national claims information database. That will not actually not take into account the timelines here.

As I said, I do not care whose name is on the legislation. What I do care about is that insurance companies are held to account. It was an embarrassing contribution given by both Ministers of State this evening that could have been written by any one of the big giants of the insurance industry, giants which only last week rejected the findings of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to the effect that they are operating a cartel. The negative point is that the Government has been delaying matters for nine months. The positive one is this legislation will pass Second Stage. This will send out a signal to the industry that it has nowhere to hide. I noted the comment by the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, to the effect he is considering his own legislation and he may take the spirit of this legislation on board. I implore him to address this. I do not care whose name is on the legislation. Let us do this. Let us hold the industry to account and make sure it passes on, euro for euro, the premium reduction it promised two years ago.

Amendment put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow night.

Debate adjourned.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Cybersecurity Policy

63. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to increase funding and resourcing for the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC; when the capacity review of the centre will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29408/21]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What are the Minister of State's plans to increase funding and resources for the NCSC? When will the capacity review of the centre be published? Will he make a statement on the matter?

Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications

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(Deputy Ossian Smyth): I thank the Deputy. The NCSC budget allocation for 2021 is €6.9 million, of which the provisional allocation for salaries is €1.8 million. The Government has trebled the capital and programme funding for the NCSC from €1.7 million in 2020 to €5.1 million in 2021. The funding and resourcing of the NCSC have increased substantially over the past five years. Staff resources at the NCSC have been increased from seven persons at the end of 2016 to 29 persons in 2021.

Recognising that the environment in which the NCSC operates is extremely dynamic, the programme for Government included a commitment to undertake a capacity review of the NCSC to expand the centre's ability to monitor and respond to cybersecurity incidents and developing threats. This detailed capacity review of the NCSC will inform the Government as to how the centre needs to continue to evolve. The capacity review is being carried out by an expert international consultancy and it is due to report in the coming weeks in line with the deadline for the completion of this work, quarter 2 of 2021, as set out in the 2019 national cybersecurity strategy.

The Minister and I will consider the report and its recommendations and, having regard to the focus of the report, it is likely to require wider Government consideration. As I have stated previously in this House, the Government will ensure that the NCSC is properly resourced to meet not only the needs of today, and it will also invest further to ensure the centre is equipped to fulfil its vital role over the next five years.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: May I ask about the position of director? What moneys are available to fund that role? When will it be filled? There is considerable interest in that. At what stage are the risk analyses of critical infrastructure that are under way or that have been conducted? When will they be reported on?

Is the Minister of State satisfied the review is comprehensive enough in scope? The remit extends beyond the NCSC. There are some indications from expert witnesses that we need a new regulatory structure, the equivalent of the likes of the Irish National Accreditation Board or HIQA, which set and enforce standards. We do not have that. Does the Minister of State believe we need it?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Deputy started by asking about the position of director. It is a new position. We sought a new director for the NCSC at the end of last year. We advertised a salary of €106,000 to €127,000 and we identified a candidate but that candidate decided a couple of months later not to proceed. We are going to recruit again. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I will suggest a new salary for the position. I will discuss it with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to seek approval for it and then it will have to be approved by the Government. That will be in the next few weeks.

Risk assessments, which the Deputy asked about, are being carried out by every critical infrastructure body in the country, as required by the directive on the security of network and information systems, the network and information security, NIS, directive. Part 2 of the directive is coming out and I will be discussing it with other communications ministers at the Council of Europe meeting on Friday.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister of State. I ask him to revert to me on the regulatory framework that cybersecurity operates within. The NCSC has an important role and needs to be resourced and equipped but it is one piece in an overall jigsaw. Is the Minister of

State satisfied? It was suggested by experts that the system is of a type that needs to be taken within the Department of the Taoiseach. Is the Minister of State satisfied that the overarching systems are being reviewed and assessed?

On a related matter, bearing in mind critical infrastructure such as gas interconnectors, there was a major incident in the United States that had a significant impact. Is the Minister of State satisfied this type of critical infrastructure has the necessary systems in place to minimise the risk of the type of attack that the HSE and Department of Health suffered?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The role of the NCSC is to advise critical infrastructure providers on how to protect themselves. It carries out research and training and when an incident occurs, it provides the incident response, which is exactly what it did for the HSE. It does so under the auspices or framework of the NIS directive. That is the overarching, regulatory framework. We are producing new cybercrime legislation to put the NCSC on a statutory footing. At present, CSIRT-IE is on a statutory footing but not the NCSC. With my European partners, we are developing a new NIS directive, the NIS 2 directive, which will go further than the existing one and will probably extend to more critical infrastructure providers. I am happy with the current position but I remind all Deputies it is the responsibility of all critical infrastructure providers to provide their own cybersecurity and to protect their own networks.

National Broadband Plan

64. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to expedite and provide a five-year programme with expected completion dates for the roll-out of the national broadband plan to facilitate remote and blended working; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29210/21]

Deputy Seán Canney: We have heard talk that the national broadband plan may be expedited. What dates are expected for the new programme to facilitate remote and blended working? The programme needs to show dates for areas because the detail on dates available to consumers is very vague.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Since the pandemic, the national broadband programme and its importance have been underlined for everybody. When the programme was first introduced, there were debates on whether it represented value for money, but at this stage it is well understood by everybody that broadband is essential to the running of commerce and government, and even social networks. The original objective was to implement the national broadband plan within seven years. The Government has committed to reviewing this and to finding a way to reduce the term to five years. With that in mind, considerable progress has been made with the suppliers and through Departments and negotiation on finding a way to reduce the period from seven years to five. There will be announcements in this regard shortly.

Deputy Seán Canney: We are talking about having a five-year programme. The problem consumers have is that when they make inquiries about when they may expect to have fibre broadband in their homes, they are not being given dates. They are basically told they are at pre-survey stage. No date is forthcoming when they ask about expected dates for having broadband provided.

If a company has a programme that runs for five years or seven years, there has to be some

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indication or target dates for when things will be done. I was involved in the national broadband plan and I understand how it is being rolled out. However, we are a year and a half into the programme and almost 4,000 houses have been passed at this stage. That is a small number compared with the target we had set.

I understand negotiations are under way. If consumers are not going to get fibre broadband for three or four years, why can we not tell them that? They could then make alternative plans rather as there would be no mystery about the date they will get it. This is very poor. The answer given is to check the website but the website does not give dates. It is important that we have specific dates built in so that consumers know when they are going to get fibre broadband and whether it will be in two years, three years or however long.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The current position is that when a consumer asks National Broadband Ireland for information the company will provide it up to a certain point. For the coming two years, consumers can find out whether their home is in a given district and when that district is due to be done. Beyond that, the company has not provided data. One of the reasons is that the times are being shortened. The whole plan is being reworked. Another reason is that there is uncertainty in years three, four and five about exactly what point these things will be done. Premises which are due to be done in years six and seven are being brought forward into years four and five. There is a realignment of the plan. There is an analogy with the weather. It is far easier to tell more accurately in the coming six or 12 months when a consumer will be connected rather than in three years or four years.

Deputy Seán Canney: I understand that when a district is at survey stage the company will say that once a survey has been done, consumers in the district will get a connection within 18 months. However, if the Minister is revising the plan, it is important that we tie down the contractors to what will be done and when it will be done in years three, four and five. That needs to be done now so that there is certainty for the 500,000 households which are expecting broadband. These people have been told they will get it.

We hear about a shortening of the timeframe and I welcome that. It is good news that completion dates for years six and seven are being brought forward to years four and five. It is good news that we will get it all done in five years. Nevertheless, we should remember that we need to let people know. If I do not have fibre optic broadband in my house and, as it happens, I do not, I have to look at an alternative. I have to decide what to invest in and consider the duration for which I should enter into a contract with a satellite or other provider. The main point is that people need to have certainty.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Deputy makes a good point. The whole experience, from the point of view of the public, of finding out when a household's broadband will be connected should be clear and transparent and similar to the experience of a consumer dealing with a commercial provider. I absolutely accept that. The Deputy makes the point that he believes the contract with National Broadband Ireland should include terms along those lines. The contract is being renegotiated at the moment and we are approaching a point where we will have a new or amended contract. I will talk to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, about how we can bring the Deputy's suggestions into effect.

North-South Interconnector

65. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the review of the North-South interconnector will be published; if he will ask Eirgrid to halt all activities relating to the construction of the interconnector, including stopping procurement processes until such a time as the Government review into the project is undertaken and reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29409/21]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: When will the review of the North-South interconnector be published? Will the Minister request that EirGrid halt all activities relating to the construction of the interconnector, including stopping procurement processes, until such time as the Government review into the project is undertaken and reports? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications(Deputy Eamon Ryan): The North-South interconnector is critical to improving the efficient operation of the all-island single electricity market and increasing security of electricity supply in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It will also help Ireland to move towards our 70% renewable electricity target by 2030. A resilient and well-connected energy infrastructure is vital for Ireland's economic well-being and the ability to respond to the future needs of energy consumers.

The option of undergrounding the North-South interconnector has been comprehensively assessed on several occasions. Most recently, the key finding from the international expert commission's report of October 2018 was that an overhead line remains the most appropriate option for this critical electricity infrastructure.

Notwithstanding this, I have decided to commission a further short review to assess if the overall finding from the 2018 report remains valid. Terms of reference for this study were published on my Department's website on 21 April. On 7 May, my Department initiated a procurement process using the procurement frameworks administered by the Office of Government Procurement to appoint an expert to undertake the review. The aim is to complete the review as quickly as possible.

The 2012 Government policy statement on the strategic importance of transmission and other energy infrastructure states: "The Government does not seek to direct EirGrid and ESB Networks or other energy infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies". Due to the long lead times that can arise in projects of this nature, EirGrid gained early approval from the independent energy regulator to commence procurement. However, there will be no supply of materials until the planning process in Northern Ireland is complete and construction will not commence until the latest review is concluded.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On the current review, has the Minister appointed a review team yet? If so, who is involved and when were they appointed? If not, when will the team be appointed? What is the timeline for its work? When and where will it meet and who will it engage with?

I read the terms of reference for the review. This is a missed opportunity to get the project back on track because it does not do the two things that are needed. The first is to provide assurance that the best and most up-to-date evidence is being used and the project is being developed with the best and most up-to-date information. The second reason is related. The review will

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not assuage the concerns of residents who see it for what it is, that is to say, another box-ticking exercise. That is regrettable because I believe there is an opportunity to get this right. The Minister needs to be brave and take it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We have not yet appointed the team. I expect it will be appointed shortly and that the review will take a short number of months. It is important for all concerned that we get clarity on this and it reaches a conclusion. The project has been an issue for many years now. It has been subject to extensive planning consultation, court hearings and ongoing court proceedings in Northern Ireland. Nothing can happen until that judicial process is concluded. That allows us a period to do a further review.

The North-South interconnector is critical infrastructure. We need to assess again the recommendations issued with regard to overgrounding versus undergrounding. One thing is absolutely clear; we need this project completed quickly. There are real stressed conditions in the provision of power in this country. The same applies on the other side of the Border. If we do not provide proper interconnection, a fracturing of energy policy will materialise across the island, between North and South. I imagine we all agree that is something we should try to avoid.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Energy needs in the North have changed substantially according to the information presented. That points to the need to have some analysis and a review of this project that is up to date and takes on board current and future demand. I note reports in the Sunday newspapers on the prospect of blackouts and concerns about energy security.

I believe the North-South interconnector is a perfect example of the failed efforts of EirGrid, supported or enabled by Government, to deliver needed projects. Will the Minister acknowledge that there are fundamental weaknesses in the approach taken by EirGrid with regard to public involvement in this project when compared with, for example, the approach taken in respect of the Kildare-Meath line? Will he acknowledge that, according to the 2018 report, undergrounding is technically feasible and that the arguments made to the contrary do not stand up and have been busted?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I acknowledge the reports in the Sunday newspapers to which the Deputy referred. They are correct in that we have seen, in recent months, a series of amber alerts on our system pointing out the real difficulties we have. These are due to a whole variety of different complex issues, largely gas infrastructure being out of commission. They are also due to a lack of investment in the grid and our lack of options to move and balance power across the island at local and national levels. One of the other things which is becoming increasingly clear, and which I see in my everyday life as a member of the Government, is that new industrial developments and employment opportunities are increasingly going to those areas where the grid is secure and accessible. This is one of the reasons an overground solution presented itself. Such a solution allows for the north east to attract industry which will need to connect into that grid. This will only work, however, if it is part of a stable grid. This requires North-South interconnections. As we develop more and more renewable power, we will be able to balance our system and provide jobs, which is what this grid interconnection will do more than anything else.

National Broadband Plan

66. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan in Galway city and county; the number of premises in Galway city and county that are now connected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29389/21]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will return to the issue of broadband. Deputy Canney has raised this issue but I am raising it with specific regard to the status of the roll-out of the national broadband plan in Galway city and county. How many premises in Galway city and county are now connected? I do not know if the Minister of State is familiar with the works of Kafka but I have privileges as Leas-Cheann Comhairle and therefore have the reply here. If he likes, the Minister of State can save going into the detail of the reply but I fail to see the answer to my question within it. Perhaps he can enlighten me.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: There are 38,897 premises in the intervention area in County Galway that will receive access to high-speed broadband under the national broadband plan, NBP. I am advised that, as of 27 May, 14,914, or 38%, of these have been surveyed by National Broadband Ireland, NBI. Surveying is the first step towards delivering the new fibre network and informs design solutions for the provision of that network. The detailed designs are then used to initiate the “make ready” project with open eir whereby open eir ensures that any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose and that other required infrastructure is made ready. This step also informs decisions on ordering equipment. Survey data is also needed to initiate preliminary works which pave the way for the deployment of fibre. Preliminary works involve construction of new duct routes, erection of poles, building chambers and tree trimming. On completion of these works, the main construction works can commence.

The NBP deployment plan is divided into 227 deployment areas. I understand that the network build is ongoing in two deployment areas in County Galway. These comprise one deployment area around Galway city and a second in the Ballinasloe area, which includes some premises in County Roscommon. The build works include 5,340 premises in County Galway. Once these construction works are completed and the appropriate level of testing has been undertaken, the fibre network can be commissioned and end users will be able to order their connection. For the areas around Galway city, it is anticipated that connections will be available in July or August and in August or September for the Ballinasloe area. Further details on specific areas in Galway are available through the NBI website, which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register an interest in being provided with deployment updates.

Broadband connection points are a key element of the NBP, providing high-speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll-out of the fibre-to-the-home network. As of 27 May, 317 broadband connection point sites have been installed by NBI.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am not sure if the Minister of State understood my reference to Kafka but his reply has just confirmed that I have misjudged that writer. He is much easier to understand than the reply I am getting. I asked a simple question. How many premises in Galway city and county are now connected? Does the Minister of State have a reply to that question or do I take it that no premises have been connected? Of the 38,897, fewer than half have been surveyed. That is one step. We then move on to preliminary works, preliminary design and so on before finally building. Further into the reply it is stated that connections will

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be available by August. Build works are to be carried out in respect of 5,340 premises. A portion of this comprises premises in Galway city and these will be connected by August. Will the Minister of State enlighten me in that regard? I will even give him extra time.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: That is very kind of the Deputy. She has it right. I am not sure I understand her reference to Kafka but the answer is that these 5,340 premises will be connected later in the year. It is a multistage process. There is a step where premises are surveyed, a step where they are moved past and a step where they are connected. This is happening in counties all around in Ireland in parallel. Those premises near Galway city and in Ballinasloe will be the first connected. I am not sure what part of that is unclear, complex or self-referencing. I have read Kafka but I am not sure this situation is Kafkaesque.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am going back to read him in both English and Irish because he would be much easier to understand now. I read him before and had difficulty. No premises in Galway has been connected. I have to determine how many of the 5,340 premises are in the city and how many are in the county. I do not know. The reason I and other Deputies have raised this is because, outside of questions on housing and health, it is one of the most frequent inquiries we receive. As Deputy Canney said earlier, we simply want information. I welcome the fact that an acceleration of the programme is being considered. I do not believe that any Deputy was against broadband. What we wanted was clarity as to who was getting it and on what terms. We wanted accountability and a public service director and we wanted the State to own the network. There were many concerns but now we are looking at the practicalities. I cannot explain this to people. They are in amber areas or blue areas. The Minister of State will know better than me that people working from home are working under serious pressure. Some have no broadband while their neighbours do. It is extremely difficult to explain to them, although I do my best. I am going back to them to say that no premises have been connected but there will be light at the end of the tunnel for some premises in the city in July.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I can come back to the Deputy with a breakdown of how many of these premises are in Galway city and the Ballinasloe area or with any further information that would be useful to her. My office is always open for the Deputy to contact me. One thing I did not get to say is that broadband connection points have been rolled out. The idea is to set up areas in villages or towns that have broadband which can be used by anyone living in the area. Some 317 of these have been set up around the country. They can be rolled out much more quickly than fibre connections. It is not as good as having a fibre connection to one's home but it does provide community access to broadband within villages and towns which people can use if they need to work from home or need access to the Internet. It can be rolled out very quickly. A number of these points have been set up in Galway. Cortoon Community Centre, Comhar Na nOileán, Lettermullen Community Centre, the old secondary school in Glenamaddy, Browns Grove National School, Mweenish National School, St. Joseph's National School and St. Mary's National School have all been connected to high-speed community connections. It is not the same as fibre but it is something and it is quick to roll out.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Dáil Éireann
Cybersecurity Policy

67. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he is satisfied that Ireland has the ability to prevent and overcome another cyber-attack given that Ireland currently ranks 26th on the 2017 GCI global cyber security index and ranks a medium to high 17th in the EU in a recent cybercrime vulnerability score; and his plans to improve cyber security. [29460/21]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Is the Minister of State satisfied that Ireland has the ability to prevent the occurrence of another cyberattack, given that Ireland is ranked 26th on the 2017 global cybersecurity index, GCI, and ranks mid-table in the EU in respect of its cybercrime vulnerability score?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for this timely question. The threat of attack by cyber criminals is increasing across the world. Ireland is recognised by the global cybersecurity index as one of the countries that are ranked highly in terms of our commitment to cybersecurity. Addressing the growing threat requires a combination of responses, including actions by the State, by individual organisations and by all of us, as citizens. While ensuring the security of the networks and information systems of organisations is a matter for each individual organisation, the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, plays an important role in this area.

The NCSC was established by Government decision with a broad remit across the cybersecurity of Government ICT and critical national infrastructure. It acts as a central contact point in the event of a Government-wide or nationwide cybersecurity incident affecting the State. The NCSC also co-ordinates and supports the response to significant incidents, with the lead role being taken by the entity affected by the incident.

Information sharing is a key component of the work of the NCSC, whereby it acts as a source of expert advice and guidance. The NCSC gathers threat intelligence data, trends and risks from national, global and local sources, and it then shares that information with the people and organisations who need those data to protect their own systems. It supports public bodies, operators of essential services and digital service providers to improve their cybersecurity posture and to fulfil their obligations under the European network and information security directive. The NCSC takes a very proactive role by supporting these organisations to build their cybersecurity resilience continually through a range of initiatives, including by publishing advisories based on the most recent threat intelligence and by hosting seminars and workshops.

Going forward, it is important that every organisation, public and private, continues to invest in strengthening its cybersecurity resilience. Recognising the need to evolve continually, a capacity review of the NCSC is being undertaken. The review, which is due to report shortly, will inform the future development of the NCSC and the extent of any additional resources required for the NCSC to continue to deliver on its important mandate.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister of State. It is an incredibly difficult time for all those in the HSE. They managed to continue to provide services during what can be only described as an unimaginably difficult 12 months and then faced the difficulties of the cyberattack. My heart goes out to everybody in the HSE who has had to deal with that situation.

We are lucky. I pay tribute to the Minister of State in terms of his experience outside of politics. Having somebody in government who knows this area and brings expertise to it is

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important. In addition to the 29 staff of the NCSC, the increase in the budget from €1.7 million to €5.1 million has been very welcome. Is it sufficient. What will the review bring?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I cannot say what the review will bring, but I can say what it is meant to determine. Under the terms of reference, the review is to establish if the NCSC is fit for purpose, if it is lacking anything, if it needs any additional skills or staff and how it compares with other similar organisations across Europe and the world. That is the purpose of the review. The review is due in quarter 2 of this year and will report in the coming weeks. I will need to consider it carefully in light of the recent events. It cannot be taken in isolation and considered as if the recent attack on the HSE had never happened. The review will make recommendations. I will publish as much of the review as possible without endangering national defence while at the same time trying to make sure we are preserving transparency and democracy as we consider our cybersecurity.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I acknowledge the work that is being done. In particular, the review will be important because it will ask question whether the NCSC is fit for purpose and what we need to do to ensure it is. In many ways, the cyberattack gives the Minister of State the opportunity to engage with other Ministers on the need for investment in this area. I would support the Minister of State in that regard. The incidents over recent weeks demonstrate we must continue to invest in this area. We need to do it primarily because of the reputational risk it poses to Ireland's foreign direct investment policy as well. I would like to know if the Minister of State intends to engage with the FDI sector in Ireland that has expertise in this area and equally with international defence experts. As I said, I appreciate the work that is being done.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I will allow a supplementary question from Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would agree with an awful of what was said in some of the interactions the Minister of State and I have had on the need for the NCSC review to take into account the shameful ransomware attack carried out on this State. We need to ensure we are up to spec. The general conversation is that 29 staff, no director and a €5 million budget is not going to cut it, but I assume we will get that answer from the NCSC review, which we will need to implement as soon as possible.

I would also like to know the status of the risk assessments that are being carried out. We need to make sure they are completed. Do we need to look to having a great level of capacity? I heard the term "counterstrike capacity" being referenced by a number of experts. Do we need to consider the establishment of another agency, which might fall within the remit of the Department of the Taoiseach or somewhere equivalent to that?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputies. The budget for the NCSC was trebled last year. The review was initiated more than six months ago and so it is not that we are reacting to this incident suddenly. I was asked about co-operation with FDI companies and international law enforcement and intelligence agencies. That is critical and it goes on all of the time. We have been interacting with those agencies and companies and they have been raising this issue with us over many years. There is nothing new there.

Deputy Ó Murchú asked about our offensive capability, which does not fall within the remit of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications or the NCSC. The question is one for the Minister for Defence. On the risk assessments, they are carried out by all

critical infrastructure providers. They are required to do that and to address any shortcomings that arise as a result of those risk assessments. It is a legal requirement under the NIS directive.

Digital Hubs

68. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he has taken since he took the decision to abolish an agency (details supplied); and his plans regarding the lands, contracts and staff of the agency. [29386/21]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: As the Government proposes to dissolve the Digital Hub Development Agency, what steps does the Minister of State propose to take to retain the cluster of digital companies that are in the digital hub in the Liberties?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I thank the Deputy. I know he has previously asked this question about the digital hub so it is obviously a topic of interest to him.

Following a strategic review, which concluded that the digital hub is no longer required to sustain the continued growth of Dublin's digital enterprise sector, the Government decided on 27 April that the Digital Hub Development Agency, DHDA, should be dissolved and its land and property assets transferred to the Land Development Agency, LDA. This decision has been communicated to the board of the DHDA, the chief executive of Dublin City Council and to the LDA.

The Government remains fully committed to the regeneration of the Liberties area of Dublin 8 and is of the view that redevelopment by the LDA of the DHDA properties in conjunction with properties in the area owned by the Office of Public Works, OPW, and Dublin City Council represents a priority and transformative project for Dublin. Preliminary modelling by the LDA has suggested this could include the construction of 500 social and affordable housing units, along with civic, community and retail development.

I will shortly request the board of the DHDA to prepare a programme for an orderly wind-down, addressing the needs of the staff of the DHDA, client companies and communications with the local communities. My Department will work closely with the DHDA on the finalisation of the necessary steps, including the redeployment of its permanent staff within the public sector. My Department has met with the LDA following the Government decision and it is also keenly aware of the need and value of community engagement as part of its plans for the regeneration of the area. It will work closely with the DHDA, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the LDA to ensure the wind-down takes account of the needs of the community.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister of State is correct that I have raised this matter on a number of occasions. It is a bizarre decision to collapse what was, and is, a successful enterprise and successful regeneration of an area which underwent huge urban decay and has managed to come out of it. It is illogical to transfer the 5.6 acres from the digital hub to the Land Development Agency. There are problems in regard to the Land Development Agency anyway. There are other sites as large and maybe larger in the Dublin 8 area that are in State hands. There is no shortage of land in State hands for housing, but there is a shortage of good businesses. The digital hub has sustained employment in the area. It is illogical in this day and age to be moving companies out of a community when many in that community are employed

in them. I ask that the decision be reconsidered before the damage is done.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The DHDA did great work over that time. It regenerated the area and brought businesses back into it. However, the view at this stage is that its purpose has been served and it has delivered what it was asked to do. Dublin city is filled with enterprises and start-ups but what is lacking is housing. Providing housing for 500 families is a really critical thing to do. It is not just about providing 500 units or apartments but enabling 500 families to live in a community, with access to the amenities they need and the associated retail. It is another form of regeneration. Business is not the only form of regeneration we can bring to the Liberties. There is still start-up activity going on in the Liberties and there is the National Digital Research Centre, NDRC. The approach we are taking is the correct one and the right way to go about it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Again, what the Minister of State is saying is illogical. While Dublin may be successful in attracting businesses, the Liberties area has been because of the Digital Hub but that facility will not be there in the future. Housing is not the only issue. As I said, the State has quite a lot of land in close proximity to the area, including in Bridgefoot Street, St. Michael's Estate, the CIÉ works land, which nobody is talking about, OPW land and two sites on Davitt Road. All of those sites are quite large. Nobody is talking about what will happen to the children's hospital in Crumlin when the new hospital opens. These are all places where homes can be built for families. There is a need for housing in the Liberties and I have been condemning what is happening in terms of those developments. However, I find it very strange that a Minister in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is happy to transfer land that is being used for enterprise to the housing sector rather than looking at the sustainability of the community in the long run and the importance of having jobs on people's doorsteps.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Does the Minister of State agree it is a bit ironic that members of Sinn Féin, who continually lambast the Government about its housing strategy, seek, on every conceivable occasion, to oppose the provision of housing on public lands? This is yet another example of that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I listed a whole range of sites in the area that could be used for housing but which the State has not even bothered its arse to look at.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputy Ó Snodaigh was not interrupted when he was speaking. I ask that he not interrupt other speakers.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I hope Deputy Bruton will learn some lessons and look at what I am talking about.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I do not want to misrepresent Deputy Ó Snodaigh but my understanding is that he is asking why we have to build housing on this particular site when there are plenty of other sites that could be used. He is saying that we should not build it in this place when it could be built in some other place. In fact, it is not an either-or choice. The sites the Deputy mentioned should also be developed for housing. One or two housing sites are not going to do it. We need a great deal of high-quality, new community housing within Dublin city centre. This particular development will bring fantastic regeneration. We do not have to choose between one and the other.

The Deputy referred to the children's hospital in Crumlin. There is a new children's hos-

pital being built and there will be many staff working in that hospital who will need to live somewhere. Many of them will find homes and communities and build families in Dublin 8, including in the Liberties, and will rejuvenate the area. I was in Thomas Street recently and saw how it is being regenerated. The Liberties is getting better and becoming a stronger and more resilient community.

I will not engage in attacking Sinn Féin.

National Broadband Plan

69. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the acceleration progress of the national broadband plan, NBP; the timeframe in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29512/21]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: First, regarding the point I raised on a previous question, it was probably unfair to throw it into the public domain. The Minister of State has an element of experience in the particular field being discussed and I was interested in his view on whether we need to look into capacity issues.

It is not a great shock that I am asking a question on the acceleration of the national broadband plan. We have had the roll-out of the planning permit system under section 254 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, over the past three weeks. Will the Minister of State give an update in this regard?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: It is indeed no surprise that there are questions on the national broadband scheme. Every Deputy in the House wants to know about the acceleration of broadband provision and when it will come to their area. It is not just an issue for rural areas. Even in urban areas, there are black spots.

As I outlined in my reply to Deputy Canney's question, the programme for Government commits to seek to accelerate the roll-out of the national broadband plan, NBP. My Department is currently engaging with National Broadband Ireland, NBI, to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP roll-out, with the aim of bringing forward premises that are currently scheduled in years six and seven of the network build plan. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has recently written to NBI seeking to put the acceleration of the programme on a contractual footing. Any change to the contract will require detailed technical, commercial and financial analysis by both parties.

NBI has established a dedicated team to investigate the potential for acceleration of the fibre network roll-out from its current contracted schedule of seven years. Substantial work has been completed by the team to date, including productive engagement with current build partners. It is premature at this point to speculate as to how many premises may benefit from this potential change. I can say that the premises currently scheduled for the latter end of the roll-out will be the focus of the analysis.

While significant progress has been made by NBI over the past year, in challenging circumstances, the pandemic has caused delays to elements of the programme. A remedial plan to mitigate those delays has been agreed and it is in this context that the potential to accelerate the network roll-out is being explored. I expect to receive a detailed assessment from my officials

by the autumn and will then bring an update to Government on the matter.

My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high-speed broadband within the intervention area for connection over the term of the NBP. An acceleration of this aspect of the plan will see some 679 primary schools connected to high-speed broadband by the end of next year, well ahead of the original target delivery time-frame of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the Minister of State's reply. It is not the first time he has given it this evening. I spoke with NBI earlier and, as such, there is an element of my carrying out a fraud, for which I apologise. It just happened that I got the telephone call earlier, before I came into the House to speak on this question. In fairness, the NBI offered me similar information to what the Minister of State has just given. Reference was made to the Department having eyes on the section 254 applications that are in place and that things are looking positive as regards dealing with local authorities and planning out the whole system. The NBI representative also mentioned that acceleration requires a complete audit of everything and looking to almost double capacity in reference to the past two years, if everything is moved from years six and seven into years four and five. The major consideration at this stage is the importance of there being a contractual footing and the interaction with Eir and the ESB with a view to ensuring everyone has capacity and can deliver on the project.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I agree with the point the Deputy is making. The State could take the approach of just negotiating these details on a friendly basis with the companies concerned without putting things on a contractual basis. However, we have taken the option to push for a contractual basis in order to have a legal agreement in place rather than relying on agreements made on the basis of good faith. As I said, there is continual pressure for broadband roll-out from every Deputy. There will be a focus from the public on getting information and a more detailed roll-out plan showing when people will get broadband in their area. I will do everything I can to make the situation as clear as possible.

The broadband connection points are an option and can be rolled out rapidly. The plan is to connect community centres and schools quickly. If the Deputy has been in a primary school classroom recently, he will have seen that blackboards have been replaced with electronic whiteboards. Every school needs a broadband connection.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister of State for his answer. He hit the nail on the head regarding the necessity of putting things on a contractual basis and ensuring there is follow-through. We need to make sure that happens.

I have a final question. There is a plan in place for this particular roll-out but there will be huge areas for which it will be three, four or five years before they have proper broadband provision. I hope we have the detail by the end of the year on the complete accelerated plan and timelines. Mobile telephone companies and satellite broadband providers offer some solutions but we probably need an element of a State audit and to look at anything that can be done to facilitate capacity and ensure we can offer an interim solution to those areas. If satellite is the option taken, it may require a conversation between the Department and the private providers.

9 o'clock

Deputy Ossian Smyth: It will be difficult and disappointing for anybody in year 4 or year 5 who feels an immediate need and is faced with this long gap. The Deputy suggests looking

at technologies like satellite or fixed wireless and he is absolutely correct. Those technologies are developing all the time. One of the things about a project like this is that the assumptions made at the start or the environment at the start will be very different a couple of years later as technology develops. Fixed wireless access will be suitable in some situations. More mobile masts will provide some type of basic broadband connection, and for many people that will be the answer. It will not be easy. Accelerating from seven years to five years still leaves people waiting until year 5, and many of those people will not be happy. We have to investigate every other way to give them broadband connections, whether in a community setting, through a wireless setting or through a school.

Departmental Schemes

70. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will consider expanding the better energy warmer homes scheme to include households that previously benefited from insulation grants but do not meet the required building energy rating, BER; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29207/21]

Deputy Seán Canney: I wish to ask the Minister about the better energy warmer homes scheme. Will he expand the scheme to include households that previously benefited from the insulation grants but do not meet the required BER, in particular houses with solid wall construction that under previous iterations of schemes could not be insulated and just saw their attics done. Now that external wall insulation is part of a grant scheme, can we look at inviting people in these houses back into the scheme?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank Deputy Canney for his question. The better energy warmer homes scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low-income households who are vulnerable to energy poverty. In order to qualify for support, applicants must own and live in their home, which must have been built and occupied before 2006, and must be in receipt of certain social welfare payments. To date, over 143,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme. In 2020 the average value of the energy efficiency measures provided per household was over €14,800.

There are nearly 8,000 homes on the warmer homes scheme work programme. These homes have not previously received any free upgrades under the scheme and for that reason are the priority to receive upgrades. Recommendations on the implementation of changes to the scheme to better target those most in need are being developed and I anticipate that they will be finalised shortly.

It is important to note that I have secured additional resources this year to expand the capacity of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, to deliver the scheme. Funding for the energy poverty retrofit schemes has also increased to over €109 million in 2021. This is an increase of €47 million on the 2020 allocation. In addition, delivery capacity has increased due to a new, broader contractor panel that commenced at the end of 2020.

Deputy Seán Canney: It is a great scheme for the people who need it and who are in energy poverty, but in the review being done it is important we look at households which are still in energy poverty. They are not getting the benefit of the scheme as it is now. I accept that lots of homes have not benefited so far, but it is important we redress the absence of proper insulation in some of the houses. This is nobody's fault but is due to the types of grants that were available

in the past and the type of construction of these houses. I welcome the fact that additional resources are being put into the SEAI, but it is important we now expedite the installation process because there are still very long waiting times from the time a person applies for the scheme until even a survey is carried out. The Minister might look at that as well.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will commit to looking at that. The key issue is that we are looking to get to every single house in the country. That is what we have to do to meet this climate change challenge. Every place matters. We have to go to every community in a systematic way. It will take three decades, with 500,000 houses a decade and 50,000 houses a year reached. That is what we need to do. That is why at the launch of the national economic recovery plan today the message given to people was that we need more than anything else young people to start developing the skills, including the craft skills, that will help us in this work. In truth, one of the biggest obstacles to the ramping up we need to do is the shortage of skilled carpenters, plumbers, plasterers and builders to be able to do this work. That is the first, most immediate and biggest constraint. We are spending a lot of money not just on the warmer homes scheme - about €100 million, as I said, to tackle fuel poverty - but also on social housing. That is another area where we need to ramp it up. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has scaled up that budget. We will not give up on this. It will have to be consistent year in and year out to get every home that way, as Deputy Canney rightly said we need to do.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Minister. I agree with all the sentiments he has expressed regarding the importance of this issue. It is one of those areas where we can make a huge difference to people's lives and at the same time save a lot on energy and make sure that people's homes are warmer and better places for them to live in. An issue arising now, as the contractors will tell one, is that the cost of materials, including insulation material, is growing as a result of a lack of supply of certain materials to make the product. It is important we keep an eye on this, spend the allocations from the budgets the Government has set and which the Department has successfully got from central government, and get as many houses done as possible with those allocations. I welcome the fact that social housing is being included. This is a huge undertaking. Coming from a construction background, I understand there is a huge shortage of skills, but we need to keep focused and make sure we do not leave behind these houses that had got some but not all of the benefits of previous schemes.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is true what the Deputy says about the supply chain. Across a range of different sectors what we are seeing as a result of the pandemic is disruption to global supply chains. It is very real and is occurring in the construction sector as well as other sectors. It is adding to inflationary pressures, which is a real difficulty. We have to hope and expect that, as the economy returns to some sort of normal, the vaccines are rolled out and people are able to get the supply lines working better again, that short-run cost inflation will be temporary. The Irish industry has been good at this. We raised the planning and building regulations standards in 2007 and 2008, I recall, when we were in government. I remember talking a few years later to someone from Enterprise Ireland who said that that had led to a transformation in the supply chain of Irish companies which had good-quality insulation. Our standards at that time were higher than those in the UK and elsewhere. We ended up being an exporting country for a lot of such material. It is not just jobs in the construction sector; I think we can create jobs in the supply lines, where we have good companies, and that with the 30-year supply chain we can get the cost down and get the industry built up.

National Broadband Plan

71. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of completed connections made under the national broadband plan in 2020 and to date in 2021. [29371/21]

Deputy Brian Stanley: I wish to ask the Minister the number of completed connections made under the national broadband plan in 2020. I know he will not have complete up-to-date figures for 2021, but even indications of how the programme is going would be of use. The Minister knows how important this is for jobs and balanced regional development and in the context of increased remote working.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The national broadband plan State-led intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland under a contract to roll out a high-speed and future-proofed broadband network within the intervention area, which covers 1.1 million people living and working in over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms, along with 695 schools. Despite the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, National Broadband Ireland has made steady progress on delivery of the new high-speed fibre network under the national broadband plan. I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that as of 27 May, over 220,000 premises have been surveyed across all counties.

This survey work has enabled detailed designs to be developed for each deployment area. The detailed designs are then used to initiate the so-called make ready project with Open Eir, whereby Open Eir ensures that any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose and makes ready other required infrastructure. This step also informs decisions on equipment ordering. Survey data are also needed to initiate pre-works, which pave the way for the deploying of fibre. Pre-works involve the construction of new duct routes, the erection of poles, the building of chambers and tree trimming. On completion of these pre-works, the main construction works can commence.

The first fibre-to-the-home connections have been successfully connected in Carrigaline, County Cork, and Cavan, with almost 4,000 premises passed and available for connection to date. Premises in Galway and Limerick are expected to be available for connection in the coming months. I am advised that build works are continuing across the country in 12 deployment areas covering townlands in Carrigaline, Ballinasloe, Cavan, Clare, Dundalk, Galway, Limerick, Monaghan, Roscommon, Tipperary, Tralee, Wexford and Carlow. In addition, make ready work is under way in a further 15 deployment areas.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. If I heard him correctly, he stated that 220,000 premises had been passed. Will he clarify that figure?

Some 115,00 premises should be connected to high-speed broadband by the end of 2021. Some 544,000 premises are included in the national development plan, with between 70,000 and 100,000 premises to be passed each year thereafter. I welcome that the primary schools programme is being rolled out quickly. I understand that 679 schools will be done by the end of 2022, which is good news. These connections will be welcome. I also understand that more than 90% of premises should have access to high-speed broadband by 2025. Has Covid impacted much on these deadlines? Has National Broadband Ireland, NBI, missed any of them?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Deputy's first question was on whether the 220,000 homes had

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been passed. No, but they have been surveyed. The number of homes that have been passed and are ready for connection to broadband is 4,000. The first of those was connected this year in Carrigaline.

The Deputy asked whether the pandemic had delayed the deployment. The answer is “Yes”. The original deployment plans for the first year will not be met. However, the deployment plans for later years will be greater. The new contract will define that acceleration.

To clarify, the first stage is the surveying of premises. Later stages eventually arrive at the point where fibre is passing the house. Of those homes, there are 4,000.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister of State for clarifying. However, my question was on the number of homes connected. Some 115,000 should be connected by the end of 2021. From the Minister of State’s answer, I understand that a small number of houses are starting to be connected. That is welcome.

In my constituency, some 12,000 people commute out of Laois every day, which is unsustainable, and more than 7,000 commute out of Offaly. Nearly 20,000 people commute out of both counties for work. We need to get more people working from home or working in their constituencies, using technologies such as the one we are discussing.

We cannot penalise people for delays owing to Covid. That would be unreasonable. Setting that aside, though, will the Department consider penalties if deadlines are missed? What would the penalties be? Is the Minister of State confident the project will meet all of its deadlines?

The Minister appoints one member to the board of NBI. I pointed this fault out at the time. Who is the Minister’s representative on NBI at the moment and how is that situation working out?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Deputy’s first point was about how working from home underlined the need for broadband. It creates greater demand, as people working from home will need more broadband for their video meetings and so on.

The Deputy asked whether there were penalty clauses. As I understand it, there are none in the current contract.

The Deputy also asked about the Minister’s representative on NBI. I might defer to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, if he has an answer. I do not have the answer, but I can get the Deputy that information from my office.

Did I miss any other question?

Deputy Brian Stanley: No, that was it.

Question No. 72 replied to with Written Answers.

Environmental Policy

73. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the work on the circular economy, when completed, will become a major spine of climate action planning and cross-government implementation. [29517/21]

Deputy Richard Bruton: In the context of the circular economy strategy the Government is developing, will ambitious targets be set for, for example, reducing the material usage and increasing the sectors involved in the repair, refurbishment and sharing economy, which could affect the adverse impact of our environmental activity?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The short answer to the Deputy's question is "Yes". Today's linear economic model, which is based around take-make-waste, is environmentally and economically unsustainable. The programme for Government recognises that Ireland needs to establish a circular economy to help achieve our climate ambitions. As a first step in that process, the Minister launched a new waste action plan for a circular economy in 2020. This action plan goes beyond waste management. It looks at resource use much more broadly to capture and maximise the ongoing value of materials that might in the past have been discarded. The plan reconfirms the link between the circular economy and climate action and provides for the establishment of a circular economy division in my Department, with a mandate to ensure a whole-of-government approach in line with the programme for Government commitment.

My Department has produced a draft whole-of-government circular economy strategy. It is undergoing public consultation. Its first iteration aims to provide an overall framework for circular economy policy development. I intend to have the strategy updated in full every 18 months to two years. Future versions will include specific actions and targets for all Departments and sectors of the economy. Following publication of the strategy, an interdepartmental circular economy working group will be established to drive cross-government implementation. This joined-up approach will ensure circular economy practices are embedded across government.

In parallel, the 2021 climate action plan is in preparation and treats the circular economy as a cross-issue of importance. Circular economy actions and principles will be incorporated across the thematic areas of the document, for example, in terms of construction, agriculture, food loss and enterprise.

Deputy Richard Bruton: While I welcome the strategy's introduction, it is disconcerting to see that what has been published to date contains no targets, proposes no specific actions or timelines by which they would be delivered, and provides for no budget through which it would be effected. Does the Minister of State not agree we need to take a radical look at sectors like construction, retail and fast fashion and make genuine changes in the way their activities perform so that we can genuinely see a greater length of life for products and more usage of materials instead of products going to the dump at the end of their lives? Without targets, budgets and actions, it is difficult to see how the strategy will make an impact.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: We are at the public consultation stage. We need budgets and timelines, but we must first establish what our principles are. I agree we need to take a radical look at practices like fast fashion. Since they are cultural, they will be difficult to change.

Deputy Bruton has made insightful contributions to the process so far. They are of great use to me. I thank him for putting in the effort to provide that information, which I am sure is based partly on his experience as Minister.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I thank the Minister of State and am glad he finds the work I did to be of some use, but I will repeat what I said. We need to see actual actions, for example, banning best before dates being put on food products and only relying on the use by dates, which

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is the statutory requirement. In large retail stores, 20% of space could be provided for people who bring their own containers. While I accept that establishing the principles is important, we need to go beyond that and see pragmatic actions coming from the strategy instead of relying on broad-based principles.

I tried to submit questions to other Ministries to learn how they were adopting the circular economy concept. Despite the whole-of-government approach, they rejected taking the questions. They did not even have the courtesy to offer replies.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I assure the Deputy that I am deploying and implementing measures instead of just producing strategies or documents that go on shelves. I am keen to see things happen, knowing that my time as Minister of State is not infinite. Certainly, the idea of removing best before and sticking with use by is a good suggestion, as is the allocation of parts of retail use for people with their own containers, which is certainly something worth looking at. I will address the problem of the Deputy putting questions to Departments which are refused because they are not part of my Department. Just like climate change, the circular economy is a whole-of-government issue which means that every Department has to be answerable for their part.

Yesterday, I had a meeting with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste on the circular economy and I know that at the highest levels in Government that they are keen to make this work and are fully behind it.

Climate Change Negotiations

74. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the Irish position in relation to extension of the emission trading system to new sectors and to the negotiation of a new effort to sharing target for member states as part of the new EU approach Fit for Fifty Five. [29518/21]

Deputy Richard Bruton: This question is just to clarify an issue. In the European negotiations going on under what I believe is a title called the Fit for 55 package, as the targets that are being set are being enhanced. Ireland has a target of of 43% reduction in the emissions trading system, ETS, and 30% including flexibilities in non-ETS. Can the Minister now tell me what the EU is now seeking of us and what the Government's position is in these negotiations?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank Deputy Bruton. With the 2030 Climate Target Plan and EU climate law, the EU will raise its ambition on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to at least 55% below 1990 levels by 2030. This is a substantial increase compared to the existing 40% emissions reduction cut. The Commission is preparing to present by July 2021 an overhaul of all relevant climate legislation as part of a what is called a Fit for 55 Package to align with the newly proposed target.

Ireland fully supports the enhanced ambition at EU level. It is consistent with the national approach, as the programme for Government commits to achieve net zero emissions by no later than 2050, and a 51% emissions reduction by 2030.

However, in the absence of the Commission's proposals, it is not possible yet to analyse the potential impact on Ireland in terms of technical feasibility, cost-effectiveness and fairness.

Ireland has agreed with other member states that the Commission should swiftly put forward its legislative package, together with an in-depth examination of the environmental, economic and social impact at member state level.

It will be important that the updated EU 2030 target of at least 55% is delivered collectively by the EU in the most cost-effective manner possible, balancing considerations of fairness, cost effectiveness and solidarity, and ensuring that no one is left behind.

If I may refer to one further specific issue which has been debated at length at the Council meetings which is the issue of whether the ETS would be extended, particularly into the areas of heating and transport. I am interested to hear the Deputy's own views but my own perspective, which I have shared with the European Council, is that particularly in our country with the commitment which is now legal to increase carbon tax, year in and year out until 2032 to a level of €100 a tonne, a change in the ETS in the transport area would have significant knock-on and difficult consequences for us. That is not an initiative that I will be supporting within the Fit for 55 Package negotiations process.

Deputy Richard Bruton: My concern is, in particular, on the challenges that we face in agriculture and land use. At the moment there is no provision for recognising land use other than through the flexibilities. If we are to see significant progress on agricultural emissions we will have to be in a position to pay farmers for effectively carbon farming. That does not seem to be in the proposals. That might emerge if agriculture entered into the ETS. What negotiating stance is being taken by Ireland? Are we seeking to introduce land use into this so that sequestration done on farms will be a credit against our obligations? We need to change the system that is now in place if we are to drive change in a way that reflects the phrase just transition within the sector.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Much of what happens here will depend on the outcome of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, negotiations which are not concluded yet. I will be honest in saying that I will be very supportive of new income streams that we can create to pay for nature-based or environmental services that our farming community might deliver. It is critical that the CAP negotiations help in delivering on that.

The Deputy will be aware that many of the regulations around land use issues are set at an international, UN level. The European Union has not to date set out detailed proposals regarding sinks as well as sources of carbon. I expect that to change in this coming decade and that we will start to see land use and sinks coming much more within the European system.

From our perspective and our own targets, we are very much aligning to the UN process because that is where, in the end, this issue will have to be decided. In that regard we are involved in the diplomatic arena in looking at getting the best possible measurements of the effect of, in particular, biogenic methane to reflect the need to protect nature and to provide incomes to our farmers.

Electricity Grid

75. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures he is taking to ensure that Ireland has the electricity grid infrastructure that will support the development of offshore wind off the west coast; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [29425/21]

Deputy Brian Leddin: Will the Minister tell me the measures he is taking to ensure Ireland has the electricity grid and infrastructure that will support the development of offshore wind off the west coast, and if he will make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Ireland's increased climate and energy ambition is reflected by the Government target to achieve 5 GW of installed offshore wind generation by 2030. There is a further commitment in the programme for Government to develop a longer-term plan to utilise the potential 30 GW of offshore floating wind power in our Atlantic waters.

The 5 GW target will be primarily met through development of offshore renewable energy in Ireland's eastern and southern coastal regions. This reflects the suitability of water depths in these regions for deployment of conventional fixed bottom offshore wind turbines and existing electricity grid infrastructure to connect these projects to the onshore grid.

Subsequent cost-effective deployment of renewables in deeper waters off the west and southern coast to take advantage of stronger and more consistent wind speeds should be increasingly feasible through future advances in floating turbine technology. This will benefit local communities in employment and commercial opportunities, and in the development of regional port infrastructure.

The Irish transmission system operator, EirGrid will have primary responsibility for ensuring that Ireland has the appropriate electricity grid infrastructure to support development of offshore wind. Future grid development will be informed by EirGrid's ongoing public consultation, Shaping our Electricity Future, which will analyse approaches to developing the grid in order to meet our ambitious renewable energy targets.

In addition to this, a new framework for Ireland's offshore electricity transmission system recently approved by Government, has designated EirGrid as the operator and owner of the offshore grid with responsibility for developing the necessary associated onshore grid infrastructure to connect offshore generation.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank the Minister for his response. This is a very significant opportunity for the west coast and indeed also for my home city of Limerick. The ESB-Equinor project that was announced earlier in the year will be the first of many similar projects costing €5 billion and representing 1.4 GW yet it is only scratching the surface of the potential that is there. Indeed that potential could be up to 50 times the size of the ESB-Equinor project if one factors in the size of Irish territorial waters. To harness that potential we need grid development of the same scale or else we will simply not be able to take this on and will only be tinkering around the edges. If we want to become a major exporter of power and indeed of green hydrogen, which we may produce from excess renewable electricity, then we really need to invest in the grid infrastructure on the west coast.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy and even since the programme for Government was written, things are changing here which may actually see some of the targets being exceeded, if we get our policy approach right, and we may get some of the timelines reached earlier. As an example of that, I cite the announcement by ESB and Equinor, two companies with real scale, experience and a history of delivery, and that by 2028 we would start seeing the deployment of this offshore floating capability on the west coast. Indeed, as the Deputy has said, there is the potential development of large hydrogen stores, which may not relate to the

grid aspect of this question but is one of the elements that is connected to the grid, which is how we store, share and export this power. The scale of potential for us if we get this right is beyond compare. As I said in response to Deputy O'Rourke, it is increasingly obvious that those areas that have the grid, where the power comes ashore or where the grid is strong and accessible, are where industry will go. For the new Shannon task force the Government is establishing, this is the economic opportunity to lift the entire region.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I agree that the Shannon Estuary certainly has a unique role to play with grid connections and, as we know, Shannon Foynes Port has a railway connection as well, which could be part of the development of the industry locally in Limerick and the mid-west. As well as the Minister doing what he can at a national level, we in Limerick need to ensure we recognise the scale of this opportunity for our city and the mid-west. It will be very significant in terms of jobs potential and we need to prepare to grasp the opportunity through the development of skills as well as infrastructure.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is interesting that the Deputy mentioned Limerick. I was reading *The Irish Times* a couple of weeks ago, and while I cannot recall which supplement it was, it was on this subject. I turned the page and there was a full-page advert, I presume from Limerick County Council, stating that Limerick was going to go green and this was the future for the county. I must admit I was nodding. I think it is the future for the city and the county.

If we think about it strategically and long term, we have world-class manufacturing capability in the people of Limerick. They are brilliant. I recall years ago visiting the Johnson & Johnson Vistakon plant in Limerick, which continued manufacturing there when that should have been moved to China decades before, because the people were just bloody good at working together to change the production line and keep advancing. Moreover, we potentially have world-class comparative and competitive advantage because the north west and west of Ireland is one of the windiest places on the planet, and offshore wind seems to be one of the scaled renewable technologies that will be delivered. We have large-scale access to water, which is one of the other constraints that there will be in a climate-changing world. Many countries will have difficulty sourcing water, but we have the River Shannon. If we put that together - power, water, grid, people - we should see this as the economic future of the region.

Post Office Network

76. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if there is a contingency plan to protect the network of rural post offices considering the recent warning by a union (details supplied) that up to 200 further post offices could close in the next 12 to 18 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29466/21]

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: Is there a contingency plan to protect the network of rural post offices in light of the recent warning by the Irish Postmasters Union, IPU, that up to 200 further post offices could close in the next 12 to 18 months?

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The programme for Government sets out the Government's commitment to a sustainable, nationwide post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure in both rural and urban areas. An Post is statutorily obliged to provide a postal service and needs a viable network to deliver on its mandate. The company

had commenced a transformation programme designed to modernise the business practices in post offices, attract greater footfall and complete more transactions. However, the anticipated 36-month timeline for implementing the network transformation plan has been severely impacted and has constrained postmasters' ability to transform their businesses.

With the Minister, I brought a report on the provision of offline Government services to the Government on 9 March. On foot of this, the Government approved the establishment of an interdepartmental group, co-chaired by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, to examine the feasibility of directing more Government business to the post office network. This group has met twice, with a further meeting scheduled early this month, and will report back to the Government by the end of July.

The Government continues to provide significant business to An Post through the Department of Social Protection's social welfare contract and National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, business. Government efforts have been focused on supporting An Post in the roll-out of new services and the delivery of its strategic plan. An Post has been growing its financial services as a key part of its business strategy, building on the significant savings business it operates in partnership with the NTMA, its market-leading position in foreign exchange and its existing current account, credit card and consumer-lending customer base.

The Government is committed to working with An Post and postmasters to ensure the network continues to play a strong role in delivering State services. All options will be considered fully to give effect to our commitment to ensuring a viable post office network.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I welcome much of the information in the Minister of State's response. I asked this question on behalf of the postmasters and workers affected in my constituency, Clare, who as we all know have endured significant hardship and uncertainty in the name of Covid. I would love to be able to return to Clare and tell them the Government is committed to putting preventive measures in place to prevent these closures as projected by the Irish Postmasters Union. It laid bare the potential impact if the Government does not continue with the transformation payments and put other safeguards in place to protect the future of rural post offices. The anticipated number of closures is 200, which is huge given that only 160 were lost in 2019, and six in Clare specifically. Recently, we lost a much-needed post office in Broadford, a community to which an awful lot of people seeking rural communities have relocated due to the pandemic.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I assure the Deputy the Government is committed to ensuring a viable network throughout the country. Part of the work I have been doing across government relates to that focus and exploring the potential for a one-stop shop approach to delivering Government services. As the Deputy knows, the Government is also, as part of our programme for Government, preparing a national strategy for the digital transformation of the public service. Many people will always need offline service and access to that. I see An Post playing a vital role in that work, which is why that cross-departmental group will be essential. The IPU commissioned Grant Thornton to produce a report on how the network could be made more sustainable and that report is being assessed by NewERA. An Post has also put forward a proposal, which has been assessed by NewERA.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: The introduction of a public service obligation, PSO, was vital to secure the future of the network and to allow post offices to continue to provide excel-

lent and important services. I cannot stress enough to anyone living in Dublin the need for them to remain in these rural communities. Not committing to the introduction of the PSO is unravelling the fabric and killing the heartbeat of our beautiful towns and villages. The Minister of State should not underestimate the importance of this service, and specifically to our most marginalised and disadvantaged, such as our elderly and disabled, and to the many others who see this service as vital to their everyday lives. It is interesting that during a debate on a Sinn Féin motion on post offices, Fianna Fáil tabled an amendment supporting the introduction of the PSO. Is that party, now that it is the lead party in government, rolling back on that commitment?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Stanton wishes to ask two questions before the Minister of State responds.

Deputy David Stanton: I have been contacted by constituents who are very concerned about this issue. Is the Minister of State concerned that post offices might close from the end of July and never reopen? Has she recently met representatives of the Irish Postmasters Union to discuss the matter?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: To respond to Deputy Stanton, I have had regular meetings with the IPU, and its representatives are in constant contact with Department officials. I am considering options with officials at the Department and everything is under consideration. As I said, NewERA has assessed the proposal from Grant Thornton, while An Post has also come forward with a proposal. The Grant Thornton options have been assessed and are being considered at the Department with officials. I assure the Deputies that the sustainability and viability of the post office network is critical. The transformation payments will cease at the end of June. The interdepartmental group is working on the offline services piece, and will report to the Government at the end of July, so I am conscious of that June date. Work is ongoing in the Department to look at the most viable options.

Electricity Generation

77. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the potential benefits for coastal communities of having offshore electricity infrastructure located in close proximity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29374/21]

Deputy David Stanton: Referring to Deputy Leddin's question, which is linked to mine, offshore electricity generation is an extraordinarily exciting development. I want to ask the Minister a question about marine protected areas, which have been mentioned to me. I know there was a report submitted in October 2020. Does the Minister have any concerns about the impact of offshore wind generation on marine protected areas or can they both work together? Could an offshore wind generation platform be the same? Will he also talk about the proximity issue?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Deputy Stanton is correct, it is a real opportunity for Cork as well as Limerick. They have similar characteristics. There is a world-class deepwater harbour in Cork. There is a lot of energy infrastructure. It is the same in Shannon with the Moneypoint grid. In Cork, there is the plant in Aghada, all the energy assets and the pharmaceutical industries, so it has the same combination. It is close to offshore wind energy that can be brought ashore. It will only work if we get the planning right, particularly the environmental planning. Critical to

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that, the Government is developing a marine area planning Bill which will be published within the next few weeks, as I understand. We will have to manage this in a careful way to protect marine life and to be conscious of visual issues from the shore, but I believe it can be done. To answer the Deputy's question, yes, I believe we can get that done. There is no direct result that means offshore wind must be excluded from marine protected areas. It can complement nature protection because there can be an area that is not trawled or is deliberately left idle because of the turbines, and that can see a potential return for marine life.

In the development of the projects, we must be careful about seabirds and their feeding. I believe this is achievable. We are already starting to see development. There was an announcement, as well as the advert in Cork I mentioned, for a firm based in Ballycotton, which is looking at a development in Aghada. I know it will take time, but this is the first of what I expect to be the industrial development of the future for our country. As it happens, if you look at the deepwater port areas we have, they have everything you would want in an international location, including very strong wind speeds. It will be a big part of Cork as well as Limerick.

Deputy David Stanton: Linked with that, I welcome the announcement today that the Cork commuter rail link will be electrified. It is to be hoped that if we get the turbines up, there will be plenty electricity to drive the trains, which would be fantastic.

As to infrastructure, and the Minister mentioned east Cork, the harbour in Cobh, and so on, the road infrastructure is an issue in Cobh, as he is aware. This could be a major hindrance to the development of offshore energy because the road infrastructure there is 18th century. It was designed for horses and carts, so that needs to be upgraded. I ask the Minister to support that when the report comes from the council.

Will the Minister comment on breathing life into local coastal communities and whether this technology, when it comes on stream, can do that? What are the benefits to local communities for employment, industry and servicing and maintaining the infrastructure?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Many of the jobs will come. Take the likes of Ballycotton or other areas along the west Cork or east Cork coast, for example. There are many small ship fishing vessel capabilities which would be perfectly involved in servicing and maintenance. The numbers are not huge but, at the same time, they would be significant for coastal communities.

I keep coming back to the point about the real potential in answer to questions from various Deputies. Increasingly, it seems what we see in this new energy system is that industries and jobs locate to points on the grid where the power supply is strong. You bring the industry to the power rather than shipping the power all the way. That will apply to either hydrogen or electricity. Again, to take the example of Cork and the oil refinery there, is it possible for us to switch that towards the likes of hydrogen production and return Cobh to its historical roots as a stop-off point for international shipping to power up? That is the potential we have.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are out of time for the questions. If Deputy Stanton wants to make a quick comment, there is not even a minute left.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for his enthusiasm and ask that he put even more of his energy into these projects. I am concerned about possible brownouts and blackouts because of the huge demand for electricity in Ireland, and we have seen threats of that recently. The sooner we get the infrastructure up and running the better.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That threat is something that can trip us up. We must do everything to avoid that, which will involve a series of different measures. We will have short-term, interim, open cycle gas and reactive power to keep balancing our system. Part of the problem is we have lost two large gas plants, which are down due to prolonged repairs. That has put us into difficulty. I will be honest and say it is one of the highest risk and most important issues we must address over the next year, but I am confident we will be able to do that. If we get our planning correct, this will be an industry that will power our future as a country. I am convinced of that.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Disabilities Assessments

Deputy Thomas Pringle: As the Minister of State knows, the primary medical certificate is issued by the HSE and is a declaration to say the holder is severely disabled and-or a permanently disabled person. This certificate is required for the purposes of the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Regulations 1994. A primary medical certificate is only awarded to people with a very high level of disability. Holders of the certificate automatically qualify for a disabled parking permit. The primary medical certificate also provides a tax relief or fuel rebate for disabled drivers and passengers. Reliefs may also be used to help disabled drivers adapt their vehicles.

Qualification for the primary medical certificate is subject to one of several conditions, for example, being wholly or almost wholly without the use of both legs, or being wholly without the use of one leg and almost wholly without the use of the other leg. The conditions go on like that and it shows us how archaic the system is at this stage, that these are the criteria which are still used regarding qualification.

I am led to believe the HSE is considering the matter of primary medical certificate assessments in the context of its revision of the HSE recovery and restoration plan. In reply to a recent parliamentary question, the Minister for Finance stated:

Following approval of the Finance Act 2020, which provides for the medical criteria for the Disabled Drivers Scheme in primary legislation, a comprehensive review of the scheme, to include a broader review of mobility supports for persons with disabilities and the criteria for qualification for the Scheme, will be conducted this year. On foot of that review new proposals will be brought forward for consideration.

I have many examples of people who are discommoded by the scheme. This scheme has been frozen for quite some time and it is hoped this review will come forward, but I have my doubts. For example, one gentleman, who has just turned 50, suffers from idiopathic Parkinson's disease, dystonia, which is severe cramping, and dyskinesia, which is an involuntary movement.

He applied for the certificate in June 2018. The medical officer assessed him at home and told him on the day that he would not qualify under the criteria. He received the refusal letter on

27 November 2018. He was told he would not qualify until the criteria change. This gentleman had to get a loan to buy an automatic car as he was no longer able to drive a manual vehicle. No supports were available for this man and his family even though he had a registered carer.

Another example is a woman in her late 40s who is registered with the Irish Wheelchair Association and was refused a primary medical certificate. She had an accident in 2007 and has had multiple back surgeries to allow her to be able to walk. She has bolts and screws all over her back. If she was to lie down on a floor, she would not be able to get back up. She is in chronic pain, unable to work and finds walking a challenge. The last operation she had was in 2015. She lost the use of her left leg for over a year but movement has partially returned. She is unable to use public transport. This is a scheme she would benefit from but she does not satisfy the criteria. She has applied many times and been refused.

There is no review process for these applications. An applicant can appeal but will have to travel to the Disabled Driver Medical Board of Appeal in Dún Laoghaire for a hearing. Before Covid, it was taking a year for appeals to be heard and at that stage, when people are in chronic pain, they cannot travel what is a long distance in some cases. A review system should be set up and made accessible in each county, similar to the social welfare appeals that are called for oral hearings.

In September 2019, the Minister for Finance stated that he had no intention of reviewing the criteria that allowed people to qualify for the scheme. A new functional scheme needs to be put in place without delay because there are many people who would benefit. As a society, we should make sure people benefit from this scheme and contribute to our society by being able to purchase vehicles and secure transport for themselves.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. He has outlined some difficult cases he is aware of and there are many such cases throughout the country.

The disabled drivers and passengers scheme provides relief from vehicle registration tax and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant. The cost of the scheme in 2020, excluding motor tax, was €67 million. The scheme is open to severely and permanently disabled persons, as drivers or passengers, and also to certain charitable organisations. In order to qualify for relief, the applicant must hold a primary medical certificate issued by the relevant senior medical officer or a board medical certificate issued by the Disabled Driver Medical Board of Appeal. Certain other qualifying criteria apply in relation to the vehicle, in particular that it must be specifically constructed or adapted for use by the applicant.

To qualify for a primary medical certificate, an applicant must be permanently and severely disabled with a physical disability. The terms of the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Regulations 1994 set out the following medical criteria, at least one of which is required to be satisfied in order to obtain a primary medical certificate: be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both legs; be wholly without the use of one leg and almost wholly without the use of the other leg; be without both hands or without both arms; be without one or both legs; be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both hands or arms and wholly or almost wholly without the use of one leg; or have the medical condition of dwarfism and have serious difficulties of movement of the lower limbs. I think everyone would agree that is language from a different era. None of us would write medical criteria like that in this day and

age but that was in the legislation, which is now subject to the recent Supreme Court decision.

The medical criteria for the tax concessions available under the scheme have changed over time. When the scheme was first introduced in 1968, the legislation only allowed for one medical ground. In 1989, four medical grounds were added. In 1994, one additional medical ground was added. The Supreme Court decision of 18 June 2020 found in favour of two appellants against the Disabled Driver Medical Board of Appeal's refusal to grant them a primary medical certificate. The judgment found that the medical criteria set out in the regulations did not align with the regulation-making mandate given in the primary legislation to further define criteria for severely and permanently disabled persons.

On foot of legal advice, it became clear that it was appropriate to revisit the six medical criteria set out in regulation No. 3 of SI 353 of 1994. In such circumstances, primary medical certificate assessments were discontinued until a revised basis for such assessments could be established. The medical officers who are responsible for conducting the assessments need to have assurance that the decisions they make are based on clear criteria set out in legislation.

In order to allow for assessments to recommence, the Minister for Finance brought forward an amendment to the Finance Bill to provide for the existing medical criteria in primary legislation. Following approval of the Finance Act 2020, the HSE has been informed that medical assessments can recommence from 1 January 2021.

The scheme is still in operation. All persons or charitable organisations can currently access the scheme. While some assessments have taken place this year, some of the key medical officers involved are tied up with the roll-out of Covid vaccines and that has led to a delay. The HSE has confirmed that the community medical doctors and their teams are predominantly deployed on Covid at the moment.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I am glad he acknowledged the archaic language used in the scheme and the fact it bears no relation to the difficulties people live with now and for which they need support. The Minister for Finance has opened up the scheme because of a court action. He was forced into it, basically. I am wary that we might not see changes coming forward for this. It is vital that we do and that we make sure it happens.

The Minister referred to significant tax expenditure in a reply we received to a parliamentary question. The Government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities but not the optional protocol. Furthermore, it does not provide the necessary resources to give disabled people rights. That is what this is about. Disabled people are often an afterthought for governments. We talk about encouraging disabled people to participate in society but then put barriers in their way. It is not good enough any more and we need to address it.

The examples I highlighted are just some stories of many. I am sure every Member of the House has more stories. It shows the draconian rules implemented by government. Donegal is a rural and isolated county and has among the highest forced car ownership in the country. Given that the county is so badly served by public transport, what are disabled people supposed to do? If they are not granted relief to purchase a vehicle, how will they get those supports?

It is urgent that this scheme be reviewed and a proper system put in place to ensure disabled people can access what should be theirs as of right. I believe there would be a return to the State from that. The Minister referred in his answer to the costs of doing this. There will be a return

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because people will be able to go out and participate in our society.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Again, I thank the Deputy for his comments. All Deputies have encountered this issue in their constituencies over many years. We are all familiar with it.

Given the Supreme Court decision, the temporary measure the Minister put in place to put the medical criteria in primary legislation was, to some extent, a swift move within a couple of months and the scheme got up and running, narrow as it was. At least the scheme was not suspended *ad infinitum* after the Supreme Court decision. It was good the Minister moved as quickly as possible but everybody recognises that there is need for review of the scheme.

The Department is carrying out preliminary work, including the examination of the main issues which will frame the scope of the review. Officials have been engaging with other Departments in the context of other ongoing work in mobility supports. It is envisaged the review group will be established shortly and will include stakeholders from other Departments, the medical board of appeal and other representative groups.

One of the first questions I asked before coming in today was how many people are involved in the scheme. Last year, the scheme supported the purchase of 5,500 new vehicles. Many of the people availing of the scheme have done so for a long time and are getting new cars. We need to know how many people would like to be in the scheme but are not.

10 o'clock

The best indication we have is that there are at least approximately 17,000 people in the scheme because that is how many fuel grant scheme payments were made in 2020. There are 17,000 in the system as we speak, based on the fuel grant applications, and they are the most serious issue. I will urge my Department to move as quickly as possible with other Departments to complete the review.

Common Fisheries Policy

Deputy David Stanton: Last week, as the Minister is aware, more than 60 vessels steamed up to Cork Harbour. Fishermen are very concerned about their livelihoods and the future of the industry. They handed a letter in to the Taoiseach with seven points of concern. I know a lot of these people. They are salt-of-the-sea people, as opposed to salt-of-the-earth people. They are decent, hard-working families who are concerned about the future. They are concerned about the Common Fisheries Policy, CFP. They say Ireland has not been allocated a fair share of fish quotas that reflect the contribution of our fishers across the European Union. They are also concerned about the Brexit trade and co-operation agreement, TCA, between the UK and the EU. They say it is unfair and unjust and penalised Ireland's fishing industry. They are worried about the penalty points system. We have had this debate back and forth on a few occasions. They maintain that it should only be applied to licence holders and skippers following a court conviction. They maintain the fact that there is no appeal mechanism for it is unfair.

They maintain the revoking of Ireland's fish landing and control plan by the European Commission is impacting on the reputation of the entire Irish fishing industry. They take issue with having to weigh the fish on the quay side, de-ice the fish and then re-ice it and bring it on from there. They say it is unsafe as there are no hazard analysis and critical control point, HACCP,

controls. I ask the Minister to comment on that.

The fishermen are concerned about our fishing grounds at Rockall. They want a review of the migrant workers atypical scheme. They also want the Brexit adjustment reserve fund, of which €1.2 billion is said to be available to Ireland, to be used to redress the damage to the Irish fishing industry caused by the unfair loss of quota. A compensation package should be assessed and paid on the basis of the loss of earnings that will accrue from generation to generation and year after year in the future. The Minister might comment on that as well. What is the situation with respect to the €1.2 billion?

A lot of families around the coast, from Dingle to Wexford, are very concerned about the CFP. In the previous debate we had a discussion about wind energy off the coast but a lot of these families are worried about whether their future will be sustainable and if they will be able to survive or if they will have to stop fishing altogether. In industries like fishing and agriculture we need to attract young people to keep the business going and to keep it viable. It is very hard to attract younger people if there is no future or no wage at the end of a week. We know how difficult and how challenging it is for fishermen to go out into the Atlantic when the seas are rough and to bring in fresh fish that we all like and enjoy.

I am very interested in hearing the Minister's comments on these points and what he can do to reassure fishermen about their future, that they will have an income and they will be able to put food on their own tables as well as food on other tables, and that they will be treated more fairly, as they see it. Could the Minister indicate if he is in constant contact with the Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation? What can he say to reassure those families about the future of their industry?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank Deputy Stanton very much for raising this issue and for giving me an opportunity to update the House on it. I saw the flotilla on the news coverage last week and I recognise the frustration among fishermen that led to it. I hope to address some of those issues here in the House tonight. The main points raised by the fishing industry during the demonstration on 26 May relate to: the inequitable burden on Ireland in terms of the quota transfer to the UK following Brexit; Ireland's share of quota in our 200 nautical mile zone; and issues concerning EU fisheries controls.

The impact of Brexit on Ireland's seafood sector, and the coastal communities dependent on it, is understandably a major issue of concern for the sector. However, this impact would have been far greater had the Barnier task force agreed to UK demands, or had we been in a no-deal scenario which would have seen all EU vessels barred from UK waters and subsequent displacement into Ireland's fishing zone. However, that is not to diminish in any way the very real impact that exists, which amounts to a 15% reduction in our national quota between now and 2026. The aggregate final transfer by Ireland to the UK under the trade and co-operation agreement is estimated at be €43 million.

I assure the House that this Government intends to continue to keep the focus on the disproportionate quota reductions for Ireland. I have raised the matter of inequitable burden sharing for Ireland at EU level, most recently at the May Agriculture and Fisheries Council held last week, and I will continue to do so whenever an opportunity arises.

Regarding the out-take from Ireland's 200 miles exclusive fisheries zone, over the period 2011 to 2015 average landings of all species amounted to just under 387,000 tonnes with an

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approximate value of €444 million. Of that, Ireland accounts for 42% by weight and 36% by value. I am seeking an update for more recent years and will publish the data when I receive them. I am pursuing every opportunity at EU level to increase the available quotas for our fishing fleet. As I have previously advised the House, I am committed to doing all possible through the upcoming review of the CFP to secure additional quota, where possible, for Irish fishers.

Fishers also raised the issue of fisheries control. The monitoring and control of fishing vessels within Ireland's exclusive fisheries zone are matters for the Irish control authorities. Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, all operational issues of this nature are exclusively for the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA, and the Naval Service. As Minister, I am expressly precluded from getting involved in operational matters such as this. The SFPA is currently engaged with the sector on these matters.

The impact of Brexit has been a major blow for the Irish fishing industry, but I am convinced that there is a sustainable future for the sector. There are opportunities for growth if we invest in and add value to our seafood sector, and there is a strong commitment from the Government to do this. My objective is to work with the industry to grow the sector in the years ahead. My Department's action plan for 2021 sets out the priority actions to be implemented this year to drive the development of a sustainable, competitive and innovative seafood sector. Importantly, I also set up a seafood sector task force, which brings all voices in the sector together, to advise on how we can invest in and develop the sector in the future. I anticipate receiving the interim report from the task force shortly. I assure the Deputy and the House that this Government is committed to working with the seafood sector to adjust to the impact of Brexit and to ensure a clear path for the growth of the sector in the years ahead.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for the work he is doing in this area and encourage him to continue in the strongest possible way to assist the fishing industry. I wish to make two points in particular. Could the Minister comment on the revoking of Ireland's fish landing control plan by the European Commission, whereby the fish have to be weighed in many instances on the quay side, to be de-iced, weighed and then re-iced again? It strikes me as being very strange and perhaps even unsafe.

I understand €1.2 billion is said to be available to Ireland from the Brexit adjustment reserve fund. Could the Minister indicate if any of this could be used to address the damage to the Irish fishing industry caused by what the Minister acknowledges is an unfair loss of quota? Is any compensation package available to fishermen from the fund to help them? I would like the Minister to address the two questions on the revoking of Ireland's fish landing control plan and the Brexit adjustment reserve fund. Has the Minister been able to secure any funding from those moneys to assist fishermen at this time?

Could the Minister comment on the future of the fishing industry in Ireland? He acknowledged that it is under a lot of pressure. There is a lot of stress and concern there at the moment. I commend the fishermen on the demonstration in Cork the other day. It was respectful and well organised. They linked up with all the authorities to cause minimum disruption to everybody while getting their message across. They recognise that others have to make a living as well. Unfortunately, they may have to do it again to draw attention to the real concerns they have. They do not want to be doing this as they want to be out fishing. I await the Minister's response.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy. I will deal first with the final point, which was the respectful nature in which the fishermen made their protests and their point, and

I want to recognise that as well. They certainly made their point very strongly.

As I said in my opening contribution, any sector that has been impacted in the way they have, coming out of Brexit, where 15% of quota is to be lost between now and 2026, would be massively frustrated, and that is certainly a source of massive frustration to our fishing sector. The fact a no-deal Brexit would have been worse, or what the British Government was looking for in negotiations would have been worse, is only small consolation given the fact there is a 15% impact. As I recognise that very strongly, I have set up a fisheries task force to advise on how we can invest in the sector to mitigate the impact of Brexit, alongside the efforts I will make at European level in regard to addressing burden sharing and, importantly, to support the sector financially to grow and to mitigate the impact of Brexit in the time ahead. I will be very much advised by the fisheries task force on how to go about that.

On weighing at the pier and the revocation of the control plan which facilitated weighing in factories, that has undoubtedly posed a very significant challenge for many fishermen. It is a decision the European Commission has taken following on from an administrative inquiry that it carried out. The Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority has the legal and operational responsibility in this regard and it is engaging with the sector to seek to address the impact of that decision. It recently outlined to the Oireachtas committee its intention to work towards developing a new control plan.

I fully understand the impact this will have, particularly for the whitefish sector. In the wider sense, I will work with the sector in every way I can to deal with the many challenges that face it at the moment and to help it grow into the future.

Child Abuse

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I want to express my disappointment that the Minister, Deputy Foley, is not present. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, for dealing with the matter.

I have raised the issue of redress for victims of historical abuse in Irish national schools numerous times in my five years as a Deputy. I have spoken specifically in regard to survivors of sexual abuse at Creagh Lane national school in Limerick. I am deeply frustrated by the glacial pace of progress on this issue so we can imagine the frustration of the survivors. To quote Professor Conor O'Mahony, the Government special rapporteur on child protection, he recently stated that we are quick to criticise other countries who ignore international law but our Government has openly flouted a decision of the European Court of Human Rights on its liability for sexual abuse for seven and a half years and counting.

It is disgraceful how long these men have been waiting for answers. In 2009, their abuser was convicted but they were excluded from any redress. In 2014, Louise O'Keeffe won her case in Europe. The fact that she had to bring her own State to the courts of Europe is a shame on all of us. The men from Creagh Lane travelled to Brussels in 2017 with the then MEP, Liadh Ní Riada, and myself, and they highlighted their case at the European Parliament to a number of MEPs. In 2018, the Government of the day had to be defeated in a Dáil motion from Fianna Fáil to ensure that the obnoxious prior complaint requirement was waived. The then Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, apologised to victims in July 2019. That same summer, the Minister, Deputy McHugh, stated he was happy to meet with the survivors of Creagh Lane and he said

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that it is what we do next that counts. What we did next was to erect new barriers to redress and no meeting has taken place.

To move on to the Thirty-third Dáil, in July 2020, I raised the issue directly with the Taoiseach, who said he would meet with the Department of Education that week with the intention of providing me with a timeline for the roll-out of a new redress scheme. In September of the same year, the Taoiseach told my party leader that we were still awaiting the outcome of the review. We are still waiting. Since then, I twice raised the issue with the Tánaiste in December 2019 and in March of this year. My party raised the issue and I subsequently wrote to the Taoiseach in March 2021 but, to date, I have not received a reply.

They are no longer young men. Their childhood and youth was stolen from them by their abuser. Those who were abused did not just suffer in childhood and this violent intrusion affected many throughout their lives. For some, there were family breakdowns and they were robbed of an education. They carry the ramifications of this evil with them every single day. They were children and now they are ageing men. Some, unfortunately, are not with us anymore as they have passed away. They do not have time to wait for an outcome. They should not have to wait this long for a decision on redress. This is about a sense of closure to the trauma they have lived with for their entire adult lives. These men feel utterly abandoned by the State. Is it any wonder when we consider how callously the State has treated them?

In 2015, an *ex gratia* payment was offered but claimants were required to prove a prior complaint of sexual abuse had been made. This was impossible. Thankfully, in 2019, Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill reviewed this and deemed it to be a wrong interpretation which closed off redress to many sexual abuse survivors. In the Dáil in 2019, the then Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, made an apology to the survivors on behalf of the State. It was important and long overdue. The apology was appreciated by the survivors and suggested to them that action would follow. I stated as much in my remarks to the House that this action and work was needed. It is now June 2021, 23 months later, and there has been no progress at all on including these men in the redress scheme.

There should not have been a need for review for the former pupils of Creagh Lane. Their abuse was proven in court and the onus of prior complaint has been rightly removed, yet these men had to fight for every inch they have travelled on this journey towards justice. They have been outside the gates of Leinster House protesting, they have had to talk about these painful incidents with the media and they have travelled to Brussels to highlight their mistreatment. The State made Louise O'Keeffe jump through the courts system before she was provided with justice. Is the Department playing a new game? To take almost two years to complete a review suggests it is. I ask the Minister to use the weight of her position to fast-track this review or to intercede directly to ensure redress is provided to the former pupils of Creagh Lane.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank the Deputy for setting out the timeline from his perspective. It is important to say the legacy of sexual abuse against children, whether in residential institutions, day schools or in any other setting is harrowing. I understand the review of the *ex gratia* scheme is ongoing and it is the Minister, Deputy Foley's intention to bring proposals to Government shortly in this regard.

It has always been the contention of the State that it bears no strict liability for abuse in day schools, given the unique context of ownership and management of the schools in the system. This has been strongly supported by key rulings in the domestic courts relating to the proceed-

ings brought by Louise O’Keeffe against the State in 2005 and 2009. Following the Supreme Court judgment, 203 cases against the State were discontinued by litigants with a commitment by the State that costs would not be pursued against them. In 2014, as noted by Deputy Quinlivan, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the State bore partial responsibility for what happened to Ms O’Keeffe because it had no system in place to act on the complaint that had already been made against her abuser. In response, and without legal obligation, the State settled the 22 cases where prior complaints had been made and not acted upon. It also opened an *ex gratia* scheme for those who had already discontinued their cases - there were 203 cases of those - and therefore had no way of coming back into the court system to establish their case that a prior complaint had been made against their abuser and not acted upon because of a lack of a system to address such a complaint. The scheme received 50 applications, none of which was successful.

The State appointed an independent assessor, retired High Court judge, Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O’Neill. The role of the independent assessor was to assess cases of those who applied for the *ex gratia* scheme but were declined by the State Claims Agency. In 2019, Mr. Justice O’Neill was asked to review 19 cases which had not been successful in their application to the scheme. He concluded that 13 were entitled to a payment from the *ex gratia* scheme. These applications were originally declined because they failed to furnish evidence of a prior complaint. The State undertook to abide by the determinations of the independent assessor. All 13 applicants whom the independent assessor determined should be entitled to a payment from the *ex gratia* scheme have been offered payment. The current position is that 16 offers of payment have been made and I understand that, to date, all 16 have been accepted. The other six cases referred to the independent assessor are not entitled to a payment from the *ex gratia* scheme because they failed to meet the additional criterion of having discontinued their litigation cases. It should be noted that the report of the independent assessor is not a legal ruling or judgment. It is important to recognise the scheme is addressed towards a specific cohort of historic discontinued day school sexual abuse cases which were impacted on by the European Court of Human Rights judgment in the O’Keeffe case.

The crux of the Deputy’s question was on the *ex gratia* scheme. Work on this was delayed for a period due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the Department of Education and the Office of the Attorney General are devoting significant resources to progressing this matter and there has been intensive engagement on the most appropriate revisions for the *ex gratia* scheme, including examining in great detail the complex legal questions involved.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the Minister of State for her response but it seems from her remarks that these men are no closer to achieving an answer on this. They still do not know if they are included in the review of the scheme, despite numerous parliamentary questions we have put in. The Taoiseach himself has met these survivors. He made both public and private commitments to them on this. He was vocal on the matter in opposition and before the general election. The time for review has long passed. These men deserve and, as a matter of fairness, must be provided with redress. It is long past the time for the Government to act. The abuser of these men was convicted in court in 2009.

I will ask the Minister of State some questions and I would appreciate direct responses. Will she confirm that the ex-pupils of Creagh Lane are to be included in the redress scheme? Does she anticipate the review being extended further? Will she provide me and, more importantly, the survivors with a date by which the review will be completed?

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As the Minister of State will be aware, the State is facing a court case on 7 July. The matter needs to be addressed before then. The State cannot bring all these people in front of the courts; it is so unfair. Frankly, it is embarrassing the State is resisting and prevaricating on many of the issues of redress and the survivors see no alternative but to go to court to get justice that should be awarded. The Minister has to intervene to stop this. I ask the Minister of State to give the survivors a definite answer, give them hope and peace of mind and not to let the State fail these citizens again. The former pupils of Creagh Lane do not need to be included in any review or any other scheme. Their case is clear cut. There is a conviction and, if the political will is there, the issue for them can be resolved. I hope we can get a better answer than the Minister of State gave in her first reply. It was very disappointing to come back with legalese. We are dealing with just 19 people specifically in the Creagh Lane case. It is clear cut with a conviction in court and commitments from the Taoiseach that he would intervene personally. We need to hear answers on that.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I hear the Deputy's concern and his genuine compassion for the people on whose behalf he is speaking. It is important to stress the issues involved are highly sensitive and complex and therefore require careful deliberation before any proposals can be finalised or brought to the Government. It is important to have a complete awareness and understanding of the extent of the issues that are arising, the number of people who could potentially be involved, the legal implications of any course of action, and an accurate estimate of likely costs before a new or modified scheme is determined. As I mentioned earlier, my understanding is the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, will bring a proposal to the Government. The review is ongoing and the Minister hopes to be in a position to bring forward a modified scheme once the review is fully completed.

I am not in a position to comment on individual cases or schools. I am aware, however, that survivors of day school abuse are pursuing cases through the civil courts and are receiving settlements either through the courts or on an out-of-court basis. I am not in a position to comment on whether it could be extended in the future or to give a date. I can only reiterate that it is a priority for the Minister.

Recognition is important. As Deputy Quinlivan noted, the former Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, apologised on behalf of the State in July 2019. It is important that everyone is looked after as well as they can be. Having said that, the issues I outlined must be taken into account.

Seirbhísí Oileán

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Beidh spéis ag an Leas-Cheann Comhairle san ábhar seo freisin. Tá baile Chill Rónáin suite ar Inis Mór nó ar na hOileáin Árann mar is ceart a rá. Tá scéim bheag séarachais i seilbh Uisce Éireann i gCill Rónáin a dhéanann freastal ar thithe comhairle contae a tógadh ansin blianta fada ó shin. Thóg sé píosa fada go dtí gur ghlac Uisce Éireann go raibh freagracht air i dtaobh na scéime seo a ghlac sé faoi dheireadh. Taobh amuigh de sin, níl aon scéim séarachais ar an mbaile beag seo, baile go bhfuil bocht i dtaobh foráis faoi agus a dtugann go leor daoine cuairt air. Tá sé spésiúil a thógáil san áireamh fiú nach bhfuil na leithris poiblí atá ag an gcomhairle contae ceangailte le scéim séarachais poiblí ach le ceann beag príobháideach.

Le tamall fada anuas, tá mé ag scríobh agus ag scríobh ag an EPA faoin gceist seo agus de réir mar a thuigim tá sé ag feidhmiú faoi dheireadh le rud éigin a dhéanamh faoi ach is paisteáil

atá i gceist. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil cás cúirte - níl a fhios agam céard faoi go díreach - le bheith ann an mhí seo. Tá an cás go ginearálta faoi shéarachas ach níl a fhios agam cén chóras nó céard faoi. Is cuma cén chaoi a bhreathnóimid air, níl ach réiteach amháin ar an bhfadhb seo, is é sin go dtógfar scéim séarachais ceart as an nua do bhaile Chill Rónáin ar fad.

Caithfidimid a thógáil san áireamh go dtagann suas agus anuas le 2,000 duine isteach go dtí an céibh i gCill Rónáin sa samhradh. Caitheann an chuid is mó de na daoine sin am i gCill Rónáin, baineann siad úsáid as na saoráidí ann, bíonn béilí ag go leor acu ann agus níl aon scéim séarachais ann. Beidh breis turasóirí i mbliana mar go bhfuil bád nua ag dul ag tosú as Gaillimh a bheas in ann 400 nó 500 paisinéir a iompar ach arís níl tada ag tarlú.

Tá mé tar éis an cheist a thógáil roinnt uaireanta le hUisce Éireann agus tá sé admhaithe aige go gcaithfidh sé rud éigin a dhéanamh faoin scéim bheag atá aige féin i láthair na huaire. Le barúil chomh dona agus atá cúrsaí, dúirt sé go bhfuil conraitheoir fostaithe aige anois le breathnú ar an percolation area mar a thugann sé air, le feabhas a chur air agus le fuíolluisce a stopadh ag luí ann. Sin rud nach mbeadh duine ag súil leis ar oileán de chloch aoil ach rud atá ag tarlú le fada. Sin chomh dona agus atá rudaí.

Caithfear an obair ghearrthéarmach a dhéanamh ach teastaíonn scéim nua ar fad a chlúdódh an baile ar fad agus gach séarachas príobháideach sa bhaile agus a ligfeadh don bhaile fás. Is mór an náire don oiread sin daoine de mhuintir na háite agus do dhaoine ag teacht isteach agus séarachas Chill Rónáin mar atá sé.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ó Cuív as an gceist seo a ardú agus as an seans a thabhairt dom dualgas Uisce Éireann a leagan amach sa chás seo. Seo obair thábhachtach agus tuigim gur ábhar inní é go áitiúil i gCill Rónáin, Inis Mór. Tá brón orm ach tá an freagra as Béarla.

As the Deputy will understand, this is a matter for Irish Water in the first instance. Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has had statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. Thus, the prioritisation and progression of individual projects, such as those outlined this evening, are a matter for determination by Irish Water.

My Department has made inquiries specifically with Irish Water on the issue mentioned by Deputy Ó Cuív. I understand that there is a small waste water treatment system serving a small number of houses in the village and that it is managed by Irish Water, along with its partner, Galway County Council.

I am informed that Irish Water has been investigating complaints and that works required to improve this facility are currently being reviewed. A programme of works is currently being planned. It is anticipated that these works will be completed in the second half of 2021 to alleviate the concerns of residents in the area. Further information is available from Irish Water's website, or by telephone on 1850 278 278. Details of all Irish Water's plans and projects are available at www.water.ie.

Significant and sustained investment is needed to ensure the continued operation, upgrading and repair of the country's water and waste water infrastructure and to support economic growth in the years to come. In this regard, as part of budget 2021, my Department secured funding of over €1.4 billion to support water services. This includes €1.3 billion in respect of

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domestic water services provision by Irish Water. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and waste water services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and the islands.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as ucht na ceiste seo a thógáil, ach caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil an t-eolas a tugadh dó thar a bheith easnamhach. Mar a dúirt an tAire Stáit, tá €1.4 billiún do chaitheamh ar sheirbhísí uisce agus séarachais i mbliana agus ní beag an méid é, ach tá lúb ar lár anseo, in ainneoin an méid a dúirt an tAire Stáit.

Nuair a chuir mise an cheist ar Uisce Éireann an raibh i gceist aige scéim séarachais ceart a chur isteach i gCill Rónáin a chlúdódh, mar shampla, séarachas na comhairle contae ó na leithris poiblí agus áitreabh eile ar an mbaile, séard a dúirt sé liom ná nach féidir leis scéim séarachais a chur isteach i gCill Rónáin mar go bhfuil rialacha ag an rialaitheoir a chuireann cosc air aon scéim séarachais nua a fhorbairt. Léifidh mé amach go díreach, focal ar fhocal, an rud a dúirt sé:

At present, there is no approved funding model for such situations and Irish Water currently has no remit or responsibility to fund such schemes under CRU funding rules. [Mar a dúirt siad fhéin] Irish Water is not responsible for the operation of any other waste water system on Inis Mór other than through providing for the aforementioned Kilronan cottages. Irish Water has no plans to provide a waste water treatment plant at Kilronan village.

An bhfuil i gceist ag an Aire Stáit na rialacha a athrú chun gur féidir scéimeanna uisce, mar a dúirt an tAire Stáit féin, a chur ar fáil ar na hoileáin? Faoi láthair, is cosúil go bhfuil cosc ann ó thaobh an rialatheora de ar é sin a dhéanamh.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ó Cuív arís as an gceist faoi chóras séarachais i gCill Rónáin, Inis Mór, Árainn a ardú.

I understand how the lack of satisfactory water services and sewerage systems can affect communities, business and the environment. I take on board and appreciate the frustration of the Deputy in this regard. His last point is significant. It is one on which we will follow up in our inquiries with Irish Water.

The works planned in the second half of 2021 are an immediate priority for Irish Water. Any future wider works for the village can be considered in the context of longer-term planning. We will raise this as a matter of priority. In the meantime, the Government is committed to ensuring substantial funding is provided to Irish Water under the review of the national development plan to continue its programme of upgrading water services. It is important to state this includes rural areas and our islands.

We are making progress on the challenges we face and additional moneys were announced today for ten additional waste water treatment plants under the recovery and resilience fund. There is significant investment required but I appreciate the points raised by Deputy Ó Cuív, particularly on this case. We will respond to him in that regard.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.36 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 June 2021.