



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Meán Fómhair 2022

Wednesday, 14 September 2022

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

Paidir.
Prayer.

Nóiméad Ciúnais i gCuimhne Bhanríon Eilís II - Minute's Silence for Queen Elizabeth II

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Members to rise in their places for a minute's silence to mark the sad passing of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, a truly magnificent and inspirational head of our neighbouring state, whose years of dedicated service is truly without parallel.

Members rose.

An Ceann Comhairle: May she rest in eternal peace.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: Before calling on the leaders, I remind Members that Friday last, 9 September, marked 100 years since Dáil Éireann began meeting here in Leinster House. This location was selected by Michael Collins and leased for eight months from the Royal Dublin Society thus allowing the Third Dáil to meet here after the general election of June 1922. Unfortunately, Collins never took his seat as he was killed in August before the Dáil met and the nascent State saw the start of the Civil War period. Leinster House became the permanent home of the Houses of the Oireachtas in 1924. Since 1922 we have had 100 years of unbroken parliamentary democracy and are one of the few countries that can claim this remarkable feat. This building, which is kept in magnificent order by the Office of Public Works, has served us well as the seat of Parliament since those revolutionary times.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach for Leaders' Questions, please. I am sorry-----

(Interruptions).

14 September 2022

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Ceann Comhairle got it right.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I am definitely out of practice.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach will not answer the questions anyway so you might as well ask Deputy McDonald. He will not answer them anyway.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Freud would be delighted.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for that unparalleled vote of confidence; I am very touched.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Deputy McDonald has been promoted.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry; I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Go raibh maith agat. I first acknowledge the presence of the British ambassador to Ireland. Cuirim fáilte roimhe. I extend again our profound sympathies on the loss of Queen Elizabeth II for the British people, in particular for Irish unionists for whom she has been a very significant figure of great affinity and affection. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a h-anam dílis.

As the Taoiseach knows, workers and families are being hammered by unprecedented surges in energy bills. Households have been hit by more than 50 price hikes since the beginning of last year with more to come. To underscore the seriousness of the situation, a Government memo seen by the media last week states that 1 million households could face annual energy bills of €6,000 if prices keep rising at the current rate. This prediction will have sent a shiver down the spines of people who are already struggling to light and heat their homes.

We now head into the winter. We have darker days and longer nights, and households' use of energy will increase significantly at a time when prices are through the roof, which will only add to the unbearable pressure people are under. The hard truth is that many households will go under trying to pay these extortionate bills unless the Government makes the right intervention.

There has been much kite-flying from the Government, mainly centred around further energy credits. While energy credits are well and good, they do not provide certainty. They do not protect people from the continuous barrage of hikes. In fact, when the Government introduced its initial energy credit, it was too slow. It was wiped out by further price hikes before it even landed into people's accounts. Therefore, this is clearly a flawed approach. Households need a Government response that matches the scale of the crisis. I believe the Government must take action to cut electricity prices to pre-crisis levels and apply a cap to freeze them at that level until the end of February of next year. The benefit of this measure is twofold. First, it ensures that electricity bills are more affordable, and, additionally and crucially, it provides households with the certainty they need at these difficult times. It provides certainty that their electricity bills will be brought down, that the relief provided will not be swallowed up by future price hikes and that they can get through the winter months. Cutting electricity bills and freezing them at pre-crisis levels will deliver that assurance. It simply makes sense and yet speaking on radio yesterday, the Taoiseach ruled this out. His colleague, the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, echoed this, suggesting that things should simply be worked out at an EU Level. I know that people have heard that line before. They have heard that line used as an alibi for the slow

response of the Government to this crisis that left households struggling for months.

Tá sé in am billí leictreachais a ghearradh agus caidhp a chur ar bhillí chun iad a choinneáil ag an méid a bhí siad roimh an ngéarchéim. Thabharfadh sé sin faoiseamh agus cinnteacht do theaghlaigh atá ag streachailt agus thabharfadh sé cosaint dóibh ó arduithe breise sna míonna amach romhainn.

It is all about choices. In the budget, the Government must choose to cut electricity bills and to cap them at pre-crisis levels. It is the right thing to do. It is the only measure that can provide some level of certainty for households. It would prevent future price hikes and ease the burden on hard-pressed workers and families. By cutting and then capping electricity bills, the Government could choose to protect households. I am asking and urging the Government to make that choice.

The Taoiseach: In the first instance, on behalf of the Government and on my own behalf, I again would like to convey my deepest sympathy to King Charles, the royal household, the United Kingdom Government and the British people on the loss of their beloved monarch, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. There are many on this island who saw Queen Elizabeth as their queen. We sympathise with them on this very sad moment in history, having witnessed an incredible reign in terms of duration, duty and service.

I will long remember her visit in 2011 - it marked a crucial step in the normalisation of British-Irish relationships - particularly when it culminated in the visit to Cork and during her walkabout at the English Market. In that classic Cork manner, everything eased and calmed, there was a bit of banter with the people and the visit was much more gregarious than perhaps at other locations across the country.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: It is one that will always endure in the folklore of our city and, indeed, the country at large.

In respect of the energy and cost of living crisis, we are facing the worst global energy crisis since the 1970s at least, and probably worse than that of the 1970s because it also applies to gas and other fuel types, not just oil. Clearly, it emanates from a deadly war-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Not all of it.

The Taoiseach: -----in terms of Putin's war on the people of Ukraine and his weaponisation of war. We need to be very clear about that at all times in assessing and in how we respond to this issue. It is having massive consequences for the entirety of Europe, so it makes sense that Ireland respond as part of the wider European Union framework. We are not just relying on EU measures alone, as the Deputy wrongly suggested in remarking on the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath's comments yesterday, but the European Union framework is extremely important.

We import from the United Kingdom three quarters of the natural gas that we use, but half of our electricity is generated using gas, so spiralling gas prices feed through to higher electricity bills. The price for UK natural gas on wholesale markets today is £3.92 per therm. This day two years ago, the price was 32p per therm. We are talking about a more than tenfold increase, more than 1,000%, in international gas prices. Future markets are pointing to even higher

prices in the coming months. A therm of gas to be delivered in December will cost £5.74. A February delivery is priced at £5.43. Importantly, non-energy prices are also now surging, with food and other grocery prices rising rapidly and putting severe pressure on household budgets. That is the context.

My second point is that the need to intervene in a very significant manner is not questioned. There is no debate about that - the Government is very clear that we have to intervene, as we did last year with the €2.5 billion package on the cost of living. Just like we did during Covid, the Government will intervene again to protect households and jobs.

The issue that the Deputy has put forward is one of methodology, of mechanism, that is, what is the best way of intervening to protect people. The Deputy's view is, and the Sinn Féin position is, that we should give a blank cheque to energy companies in a kind of singular, almost isolated approach to this crisis, which is now much more than an energy crisis for many households. The Government's view is that, for the time being, we want to get people through the winter to the end of March, not the end of February. We have got to do it using a range of measures in terms of reducing electricity bills but also in giving flexibility to people in the form of payments that we give them either through the welfare system, through energy credits, through cost reductions or through investment in public services in the budget, which will also reduce costs for parents and families. There is a range of mechanisms that we can use.

I would ask the Deputy for a fully costed paper from her in terms of her proposals. If she does not mind me saying so, I was less than convinced by her presentation on "Morning Ireland" yesterday. I genuinely would like a fully costed proposal from her in respect of her chosen method of intervention in the electricity price market. I believe we have to target measures to those who need them the most, but also, universally, people will need support. We need to focus on protecting jobs because, clearly, many jobs could be at risk if enterprises become unviable because of the extraordinary increase in energy costs I have just outlined and that is, obviously, a global phenomenon. However, because of the sound management of the economy, we have resources we can allocate to reduce pressures on people and protect jobs, and that is what we intend to do.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Not for the first time but once again, the Taoiseach is totally and utterly wrong in his response here. Our proposal is about helping families. It is about providing certainty so they can get through what will be very difficult winter months. Our proposals are time limited. Interventions at European level are, of course, necessary and welcome, but they should not be used again as an excuse for the Government to delay and dither and sit on its hands. In fact, our proposal would work in tandem with the proposed EU measures. Our proposals are similar to price certainty measures that have been introduced elsewhere, for example, in France and Romania. Other emergency measures, as the Taoiseach knows, have been introduced in Spain, Portugal and Italy.

The only blank cheque in question here is the one the Taoiseach is asking families to give to energy companies. His failure to act in the way I have described will allow prices to continue to rise. One thing is absolutely certain: families cannot cope with that and they are depending on the Taoiseach to act definitively. I will ask the Taoiseach again to move to cut electricity bills back to pre-crisis levels and to cap them at that level for the winter months until the end of February. That is what is required here.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said her proposals are time limited. I would say to the Deputy

the crisis may not be time limited. She may need to think beyond the end of February.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So may the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I am.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Winter is not-----

The Taoiseach: That is the point. That is the very point that I am making. The Deputy's proposal is vague, it is not costed and it is one-dimensional. It does not have the breadth or depth of what the Government is considering in alleviating and reducing pressures on households, protecting jobs, helping out schools with capitation grants, and helping out various State entities that provide services to the public whose energy costs are going through the roof as well. They will also need protection and supports. There is also the non-energy inflation, which is now running at approximately 6% and is a serious worry in terms of the inflationary cycle we are currently going through. That means supports have to be given to people on a broader basis in addition to the supports on the energy front. The Deputy said I was completely wrong. I do not know what she is saying about that-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I asked the Taoiseach about energy. He will not give people certainty.

The Taoiseach: -----because we are going to intervene. We are going to reduce the burden of electricity prices on people. However, we are going to do more in the budget and in pay. We have concluded the public service pay talks. We will have tax proposals in the budget as well. We will be reducing costs more broadly.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: First, on behalf of the Labour Party I extend a welcome to the British ambassador, who is here, and I extend our condolences to the British people and to all those on this island who have been impacted by the sad loss of their Head of State. I also note the very positive contribution their queen made to relations between Britain and Ireland on her visit here, not just to Cork but also to Dublin and other parts of the country in 2011. We all remember that visit with great affection. I pay tribute again to the contribution that state visit alone made to improving relations between our islands.

As the Dáil and Seanad resume today, we face into a bleak winter with dark clouds gathering on the horizon, and I think all of us are very conscious of that, as we see energy bills increasing dramatically for so many struggling households and families. Households are facing the dreadful prospect of energy bills that could reach €6,000 per annum next year. Small businesses are telling us that their energy bills are now as much as their rent and it is like paying a second rent for many SMEs. People and small business owners are really scared. They are facing into this very frightening period ahead, and they want to see some certainty, security and reassurance and also a sense of urgency from this Government. There is one way in which we believe the Government can and should act with greater urgency. We want to see a really clear signal that the exorbitant profits being made by energy companies will be targeted, and that we are not going to see those take precedence over the real prospect of energy poverty for so many households, families and businesses. We know that many of our EU partners have already taken action on energy bills. We know that in the budget to be published in the coming weeks, it will mean the difference for so many families between being able to get by or having to choose

between heating and eating as they see bills for food as well as fuel skyrocketing. We know also there are jobs at risk here.

Can the Taoiseach's Government act swiftly on this issue to introduce a range of measures, but in particular, a windfall tax to target profits and to fund the other measures that will be needed to alleviate hardship for families? In January of this year, we, in the Labour Party, first called for a tax on the profits of energy companies. The best time for Government to have introduced that measure would have been then, but clearly now it is still extremely important that it be done. Indeed, the British Government did it in July, the Italian Government did something similar, and we are seeing moves at EU level. We need that immediate introduction of a windfall tax alongside an immediate maximum price cap on energy bills and the third prong for which we have called, namely, the extension of eligibility for the fuel allowance to more households, including low- and middle-income households. We have the costings. We know it would cost €15 million to raise the threshold to €250 per week. That would bring quite a number of households back into the eligibility criteria and alleviate significant hardship. We need to bring in these measures to ensure that the excessive profits of energy companies are harnessed by this State.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I agree with the Deputy in her analysis. It is going to be a difficult winter, but it is our responsibility to do everything we possibly can to reduce the pressures on households in respect of energy costs, and also to protect jobs in society. I appreciate the fact that the Deputy is clear about the need to work through the European framework in terms of carbon tax or a mechanism to take the windfall gains made by energy companies, and particularly non-gas generation, which is getting a revenue that it would never have dreamt of because of this crisis. As the President of the Commission said this morning, it is not fair that companies would make exorbitant profits on the back of a war and a people, in the exploitation of a crisis. That is why we are supportive of EU measures to intervene so that those windfall revenues would accrue to the State and to member states. The precise mechanism is still being worked out at EU level. There was a meeting last week of the EU energy ministers, and the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications was there. The Commission is due to publish a proposal this week to include measures aimed at addressing windfall gains by non-gas generation and the electricity sector, and in fossil fuel extraction and production. These proposals will raise additional revenues which will be used to reduce the cost of energy for society. They may not come immediately, but they will be an important stream of revenue in terms of the duration of this crisis. We have a surplus to the end of the year. We will use that as effectively and efficiently as we can to alleviate pressures on people, but we also need a more ongoing revenue stream to deal with perhaps a prolongation of this crisis, which we do not want to see. The EU is keen to do everything it can to try to stabilise and reform the market, but that will take a bit longer.

I do not disagree with the Deputy at all on the need to make sure that those exorbitant revenues and the type of extraordinary increases that companies have benefited from are dealt with. The Sinn Féin leader criticised the Government for wanting to go through the EU framework on this matter. We are members of the EU. We believe we should work through the EU on matters of this kind. Sinn Féin may have a different view on being a member of the EU. That is its prerogative. I take the Deputy's point. This is complex stuff. The Deputy mentioned the UK. The UK had a 95% offset for investment, so how real was that tax? The European Union is focusing on the excessive revenue being generated, which cannot be justified or maintained, and we are supportive of that. More broadly and as I said earlier, we need to help people as best

we can across the different areas, from education to childcare and the cost of energy, including electricity.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach. That is important and we welcome the moves made at EU level on a windfall tax but there are things the Government could do here too that should be done. Let us look at it in the following way. We have significant levels of gas consumption coming from our own Corrib gas field on this island and we know that Vermilion's revenues last year increased by 267%. The cost of production for that gas has not increased but the price of gas supplies is now costing multiples of what it did one year ago.

Will the Taoiseach examine the idea of nationalising the Corrib gas field and bringing it under State ownership, even on a temporary basis, to ensure that we can bring greater certainty to families, households and businesses struggling with fuel bills? The State has the power to do so under legislation introduced by Fianna Fáil, namely, the Fuels (Control of Supplies) Acts 1971 and 1982. These were powers invoked during the oil shortages which followed the Middle East conflict of the 1970s. We know these powers exist and we have used them before. In parallel with the welcome measures at EU level, we need to see this Government doing more in Ireland to ensure that excessive profits are harnessed from the energy companies to alleviate the real hardship faced by so many struggling individuals, families and businesses as they see their energy bills skyrocketing.

The Taoiseach: We do not envisage or advocate the nationalisation of the Corrib gas field. The European Union measure deals with the Corrib gas field and other gas fields in terms of fossil fuel extraction or production. Before any domestic measures are taken, it makes sense for us to have clarity and a decision from the European Union on the operation of the gas market and the mechanisms it would deploy. That is also important for fossil fuel extraction. We are focusing as much as we can on the immediate, including this year, the early part of next year and the entirety of 2023. There are wider issues around the Corrib gas field in the future by the way. That company has plans for what will happen after fossil fuel extraction, including what will happen to the plant that is there, which could be used for renewable energy or variations of that into the future. We want to make sure that any measures we take now are sustainable in the medium and longer term as well.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On 6 October last year, just one week before the budget, People Before Profit brought the first motion into this Dáil calling for price controls on energy and the renationalisation of the energy supply sector to run it on a not-for-profit basis, to protect people against a cost of living crisis that was only in its infancy at that point. At that stage it was being warned that people may be facing increases of about €500 per year in energy costs. Needless to say, the Government completely dismissed and voted against the proposals for price controls and the renationalisation of the energy sector. Ordinary families, working people, pensioners, people with disabilities and those on low and middle incomes have suffered the bitter fruits of the Government's failure to support those measures one year ago. Since then, the crisis has got very much worse. We are not looking at €500 per year increases but at energy costs doubling and trebling. Some estimates suggest they will go from an average of €2,000 per year to €6,000 per year.

People are being crucified. These hikes are simply not affordable for huge numbers of people and on Saturday, 24 September at 2.30 p.m. in Parnell Square, I expect there to be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of angry and frightened workers, pensioners, students, people with disabilities and ordinary people appealing to the Government once again to take decisive

measures to protect them against a cost-of-living crisis that is crucifying them and against an ongoing housing crisis. It is very simple. Heating your home is not an optional extra. Having a shower and hot water are not optional extras. Having an affordable roof over your head is not an optional extra. Having the money to pay bills and put food on the table for your family are not optional extras but necessities. The Government has to guarantee that those needs of ordinary people, families and vulnerable people are met this year.

The people will march for energy price controls and controls on the price of food. They will call for controls on rent, to make housing affordable and to keep incomes, whether pensions or wages, in line with inflation costs. It is long past time that we took the companies profiteering from this cost-of-living crisis back into public ownership. Nationalise the energy sector and run it on a not-for-profit basis because heating, hot water and electricity are needs and not optional extras.

The Taoiseach: I will make two points to the Deputy. He said the problem has got much worse, which I outlined earlier. It was striking that he did not elaborate on why it has got much worse. It is because of Putin's war on Ukraine. The Deputy seems incapable of articulating that in the context of this energy crisis, as do many on the left, for some strange reason. The bottom line is Putin's war in Ukraine and his weaponisation of energy constitute a major factor in the extraordinary price hikes we are witnessing. That said, we have to intervene, will intervene and did intervene since the Deputy raised it 12 months ago. Some €2.5 billion worth of cost-of-living measures were taken last year by this Government across the board to deal with the energy issue, the excise duty on petrol, diesel and so on. We reduced all of that last year.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You put on taxes as well.

The Taoiseach: We also increased the fuel allowance by 55%. That was a massive increase last year. Measures taken related to school transport fees, the school meals programme being extended and the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. The student maintenance grant payments went up by €200 per year. There was the holiday earnings disregard and so on for students. We did a range of measures. We cut public transport fare by 20% with an additional 50% cut in fares for young people, reduced VAT from 13.5% to 9% on gas and electricity bills until the end of October and gave a €200 energy credit to all households. The PSO was cut. The national retrofitting scheme, with free energy upgrades for those at risk of energy poverty, was initiated. We lowered the threshold for the drug payment scheme to €80 per month, benefiting over 70,000 families, and brought forward the working family payment budget increase announced on budget day. We abolished inpatient charges for children and much more. The point is we did not stand still throughout last year. We took measures.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: You put on carbon tax.

The Taoiseach: Prior to that, during Covid, we took extraordinary measures to protect workers and the economy, which resulted in the fastest economic growth of any European member state since Covid. That gives us the resources to enable us to intervene again in a significant way on Tuesday two weeks with the budget and the cost-of-living package we will announce. If we had taken Deputy Boyd Barrett's measure and spent billions nationalising energy we would have very little left to allocate to anything right now. We have a significant surplus, some of which we will use to alleviate the pressures on households and protect jobs.

We will intervene because we realise people are under extraordinary pressures and are wor-

ried and concerned by the extraordinary price increases. We are in a dangerous moment globally, with a major war on the continent of Europe that has created the worst humanitarian crisis in Europe since Second World War with millions of people displaced. There are huge problems with energy and migration because of that, and now with food in other parts of the world. That is the scale of what we are dealing with but we will intervene.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Of course the war in Ukraine has worsened the situation but that war does not explain wind energy companies making super profits even though their costs have not changed a bit. Nor does it explain the profiteering of energy companies, which has been mentioned already, in respect of gas from the Corrib field, gas from the UK, from where we get most of it, or from Norway. It also does not explain the failure of the Taoiseach's Government and other governments, although it is worth saying that countries like Spain have introduced price controls. France capped the level of increases that could be imposed but the Taoiseach's Government, before the war in Ukraine started and when this cost-of-living crisis was in its infancy, refused to impose price controls when it was asked to do so in this Dáil through a motion we put forward. It also refused to extend eligibility for the fuel allowance or to take the energy sector back into public ownership. People are suffering a terrible cost while those same energy companies' profits increase. By the way, while the war has made the situation worse, we have the highest utility costs of almost anywhere in Europe. We also have the highest childcare costs. We have seen the biggest increases in rents and house prices of anywhere in Europe. That is a specific Government failure in this country and alibis based on what is happening internationally do not justify the Government's failure to act comprehensively to defend people against this dire crisis.

The Taoiseach: We acted comprehensively to help people over the last 12 months and we will continue to do so. We will intervene again to take people through this winter period. We have to help people right through to the end of March. We also have to protect jobs, just as we did during the Covid pandemic. Whatever the Deputy's views and although he will never accept this, we took the economy through the pandemic and we protected jobs during that time. An unprecedented recession occurred in the first year of the Covid pandemic and, because of unprecedented and innovative responses from Government, enterprises and jobs were protected. We also protected incomes to such a degree that people were able to re-engage in the economy once the recovery started. Our targets were exceeded. We support measures to reduce the exorbitant revenues companies are gaining. I refer particularly to wind generation but also to fossil fuel generation. That will be dealt with. At the end of this month, in two weeks' time, the European Union will make a decision on that, which I think is important. We will follow that and we support measures such as those that have been identified.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We should lead not follow.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I believe that in the years to come this Government will be known as the "coalition of crisis". The cost-of-living crisis is hammering people's ability to live and the housing crisis is threatening hundreds of thousands of families with homelessness and spiking rack rents. Despite all the Taoiseach said, the response of this Government has been stifling inertia in the face of these crises. Going by the rate of action of this Government, the only thing that will remain warm this winter is its own hands because it has been sitting on them all of this time. Such is the degree of the cluster of crises in our country that the massive health crisis we face is being eclipsed. However, it is still a life and death issue that is looming large in millions of people's lives. Some 1.3 million people are on hospital waiting lists at this moment in time. According to the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, mental health services are in crisis due to

the lack of investment and soaring demand. The GP system, which was one of the few remaining functioning elements of the health service, is now broken. People are waiting up to two weeks to get an appointment. Hundreds of GPs are emigrating and moving to Australia every year. Accident and emergency departments are dealing with record waiting times. People are waiting 24 hours in Tallaght. University Hospital Limerick is like a warzone. Over the summer, every hospital in the Meath area at some stage advised patients not to come near them because of the pressure they were under. It is now stated that 360 people a year die in the State due to delays in accident and emergency departments. A figure equivalent to twice the number of elected Deputies in this State are dying every year due to dysfunction and waiting times in accident and emergency departments around the country. In the middle of all of this and just before we face a new wave of Covid and flu, the HSE has decided to close key capacity in the accident and emergency department in Meath. So removed is the HSE that 23 consultants in Drogheda hospital had to write a letter to the Minister for Health stating that if this action was to proceed, it would present a threat to people's health. The decision was paused by the Minister. We welcome that. The CEO of the HSE, Paul Reid, then resigned and a so-called review was started. However, the Minister for Health said the review of the closure of Navan accident and emergency department would have the closure built into it. The HSE would simply proceed with the original decision.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: False.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I have seen letters the Minister has written, obtained through freedom of information requests, where he said the review was to be carried out under the understanding of reconfiguration. It is written in black and white. It is also in the terms of reference of the review. The Minister of State, Deputy English, said it will include a review of a functioning potential future for Navan to make it safe. Who is telling the truth? Both cannot be correct at the same time. Both cannot be in contradiction with each other and telling the truth to the people.

The Taoiseach: Are you telling the truth on Navan?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach is answering me with a question.

The Taoiseach: I am answering the Deputy rhetorically. Is he telling the truth? I have been through this over 30 years.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach set up the HSE - a monstrosity.

The Taoiseach: I will say this much: we need balance. This debate the Deputy is having now has been waged across many locations in this country over the last 30 years.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Limerick, Nenagh, and Ennis.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy can go through them all.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Monaghan.

The Taoiseach: Hospital action committees-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: That was a disaster.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Disasters, each one.

The Taoiseach: It was not.

Deputy Matt Carthy: An absolute disaster.

The Taoiseach: No, it was not.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Taoiseach is defending the removal of services again.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Deputy Tóibín's question, please.

The Taoiseach: There was one gynaecologist, if the Deputy is talking about the maternity unit.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Accident and emergency services-----

The Taoiseach: I am talking about the first stance of the Deputy's party, which elected its first Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Drogheda-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Gabh mo leithscéal, a Cheann Chomhairle. An féidir leis an Taoiseach an cheist a freagairt?

The Taoiseach: Its *modus operandi* has been to exploit a crisis, get the marches going, get it simplified-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Taoiseach is still defending the removal of services.

The Taoiseach: It gets the issue to be "they are for it, we are agin it, and we will get elected". That is what is happening. It happened for a long time in health-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach set up the HSE.

The Taoiseach: -----until we got sense as a country. The Minister has intervened. There is a review under way in respect of Navan involving James Connolly and Our Lady of Lourdes hospitals and the clinicians, in order to get an informed view.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There are more reviews than hot dinners.

The Taoiseach: Let us not undermine the motivations of other people who have different views, such as medics in Meath. There are different views between the medics in Meath. Some are genuinely concerned about safety issues, which have to be dealt with. I sometimes worry about the manner in which Deputies reduce things to just the electoral and political issue. That is why I have to say this. I have said this already on the record of the House. There are legitimate concerns with moving ahead in the absence of any proper provisions or additional capacity in terms of the needs of the people of the area. That has to happen. There has to be engagement and consultation with local stakeholders. I would have thought we had moved on. This decision was taken in 2013.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is nine years out of date.

The Taoiseach: It was taken in 2013. I have been here since 2013. At this stage it is manifesting itself. Equally, I would say we need a more balanced approach in terms of health. Yes, there are huge challenges. Covid-19 has had a huge impact on our hospitals, negatively. There

is no question about that with regard to waiting times. We have to focus very strongly on getting waiting times down because Covid negatively impacted them. There are other parts of health as well. I was at the support centre for stroke in Cork last Saturday morning. The two consultants said there has been a revolution in how we deal with stroke in this country. Mortality has gone from 18% to 8%. Is it too much, given the need for balance in this debate, to at least acknowledge that? Survival rates for cardiovascular disease have improved dramatically because of repeated and successive investment and interventions, and centralisation of cardiac care. The same has happened with cancer and oncology.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Cataracts.

The Taoiseach: Centres of excellence were opposed the length and breadth of the country at the time but have resulted in greater survival rates for the vast majority of cancers. We need balance in the debate. I appeal to the Deputy for that balance.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We do not have centres of excellence in this country; we have centres of trolleys. That is the case for anybody who has actually been in those hospitals. In the last ten months, 20,000 people have marched on the streets of Meath to protect the accident and emergency department, the most important piece of health infrastructure we have in the county. I delivered a petition to the Minister's office just two weeks ago, signed by 15,164 people. The vast majority of the 220,000 people who live in Meath at the moment are absolutely opposed to the HSE plan to close down the accident and emergency department. We will resist any efforts to make our region a University Hospital Limerick mark II. The Taoiseach should mark my words. On Friday at 1 p.m., the people of Meath will march again in Kells. It is the constituency of the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne. This march will be led by a number of funeral hearses to make sure that the Government knows that this is a life or death issue for the people of Meath. Thousands of people are alive in this county because of that emergency department. What we are asking is reasonable. We ask that the review include a feasibility study on what it would take to make Navan functional and safe for the people of Meath in the future. We want that to be fully included in the terms of reference-----

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

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----in black and white, not just as a Minister's promise.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy brought it back to the march.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: People power is the only thing that is saving it.

The Taoiseach: It is about having an honest, frank discussion and consultation between all involved about the right care for patients at the right time. Patients and their families want the best outcomes. What is the best location for that? The Minister has made clear that there will not be a change to the service provided at Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, until such time as the HSE can establish that Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda and Connolly Hospital have the extra capacity to deal with the inevitable increase in presenting patients.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Could the Taoiseach confirm that?

The Taoiseach: There have been significant improvements in Navan hospital. The State wants to invest in Navan. There has been an increase in employment in the hospital and of the day surgery capacity. As the Deputy knows, a second theatre has been completed, which will

increase capacity from around 2,500 elective surgical procedures each year to 5,000 procedures. A day ward, an expanded recovery room, a new laboratory, a new rehabilitation unit and a new psychiatric day ward have all-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach broaden the review?

The Taoiseach: -----been completed in Navan recently.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach broaden the review? Yes or no?

The Taoiseach: The future development plans include a new rheumatology day centre and a new endoscopy suite with four endoscopy rooms.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Yes or no?

The Taoiseach: There are also plans to spend €1.3 million on upgrades to the medical assessment unit and local injuries unit.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach answer the question?

The Taoiseach: That is important for the people of the region.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach broaden the review? That is the question I asked.

The Taoiseach: There is significant investment, which will continue.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Approval of Reappointment of Members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority (without debate)

- Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (without debate)

- Motion re Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform re Amendment of Standing Orders relating to pre-legislative scrutiny of Government Bills (without debate)

- Statements on the IBRC Commission of Investigation Report (not to exceed 200 minutes)

- Motion re Proposed Approval by Dáil Éireann of the Institutional Burials Act 2022 (Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam) Order 2022 (to conclude within 55 minutes)

Private Members' Business shall be the Motion re Measures to Assist with Household Bills, selected by Sinn Féin.

Thursday's business shall be:

14 September 2022

- Motion re Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Statement of Estimates 2023 (without debate)

- Motion re Houses of the Oireachtas Commission authorisation on legal proceedings (without debate)

- Statements on An Bord Pleanála (not to exceed 210 minutes)

- Water Services (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2022 (Second Stage) (to adjourn, if not previously concluded, at 10.32 p.m.)

- Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Second Stage) (if reached, to adjourn, if not previously concluded, at 10.32 p.m.)

Private Members' Business (being taken instead of Thursday evening business) shall be the Motion re Security of Electricity Supply, selected by the Regional Group.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders is modified to the following extent:

(i) the Statements on the IBRC Commission of Investigation Report shall not be interrupted to take private members' business at 6.12 p.m.; Provided that private members' business shall instead be taken on the conclusion of Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Institutional Burials Act 2022 (Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam) Order 2022, with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil, which may be later than 10.30 p.m.;

(ii) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37 shall be taken on the conclusion of private members' business; and

(iii) Parliamentary Questions to a member of the Government other than the Taoiseach, pursuant to Standing Order 46, shall not be taken;

2. the Motion re Approval of Reappointment of Members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority shall be taken without debate;

3. the Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions shall be taken without debate;

4. the Motion re Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform re Amendment of Standing Orders relating to pre-legislative scrutiny of Government Bills shall be taken without debate;

5. the Statements on the IBRC Commission of Investigation Report shall not exceed 200 minutes, with arrangements in accordance with those agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for that time, and members may share time; and

6. the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Institutional Burials Act 2022 (Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam) Order 2022 shall, if not previously

concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 55 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;
- speech by a representative of Sinn Féin – 10 minutes;
- speeches by representatives of the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People-Before-Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group and the Independent Group – 5 minutes per party or group; and
- a speech in response by a Minister or Minister of State – 5 minutes; and

(ii) members may share time.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(i) no private member's Bill pursuant to Standing Order 102 or motion for a Committee report pursuant to Standing Order 160 shall be taken, and private members' business pursuant to Standing Order 159(1) and Standing Order 169 shall be taken for two hours on the conclusion of the Statements on An Bord Pleanála;

(ii) further Government business may be taken on the conclusion of private members' business, with consequential effect on the time for adjournment of the Dáil, which may be later than 9.27 p.m.; and

(iii) the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37, which shall be taken either at 10.32 p.m. or on the conclusion of Second Stage of the Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Bill 2022, whichever is the earlier;

2. the Motion re Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Statement of Estimates 2023 shall be taken without debate;

3. the Motion re Houses of the Oireachtas Commission authorisation on legal proceedings shall be taken without debate; and

4. the Statements on An Bord Pleanála shall not exceed 210 minutes, with arrangements in accordance with those agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for 200 minutes, following which a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, and members may share time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is not agreed. The Ceann Comhairle will be aware that I wrote to him and the Business Committee on behalf of the Rural Independent Group a number of weeks ago, seeking an honest, frank and serious debate about the energy crisis facing us because of the ineptitude of the Government and the point-blank refusal to cap the prices and take

on the utility companies. The Government has refused to bring any of our own oil onshore. The Government promised to bring in liquefied natural gas, LNG, during the last election. It has totally ignored the plight of the public. There is a perilous situation for many families. Schools and small and medium-sized businesses cannot keep going. This is part of the anarchy that the Government is creating. We are not accepting the Order of Business, as I said at the Business Committee meeting last Thursday. We oppose it and will call a vote on it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Before the summer recess, I repeatedly asked the Taoiseach to facilitate a debate on the housing and homelessness crisis, particularly the review, or lack of a review, of the income thresholds for social housing, which means that thousands of families are being thrown off housing lists and denied housing assistance support. Over the last few days, there has been a drip-feed of reports that five counties will see increases in thresholds but the vast majority of the country will not. That means that tens of thousands of people in need of housing support and of social housing will be denied it. Week by week, more people will be thrown off those lists. I ask, at the very least, for the Minister to come in to give us that review, its details, and a report on Housing for All one year into the strategy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We need a debate on the specific actions that can be taken to alleviate the pain and pressure put on families by the cost-of-living crisis. Spain and Portugal have an exemption from the EU rules and have reduced VAT on fuel. They have also been given permission by the EU to decouple non-gas-generated electricity from gas-generated electricity and the related prices. We will also have a situation this year where the Government will increase carbon taxes on people. It is absolutely wrong that carbon taxes are still going up annually when people cannot afford to keep the lights on and keep the heat on.

The Taoiseach: I have already outlined that the Government is going to intervene in a cost-of-living package and in the budget in two weeks' time-----

A Deputy: Christmas is coming too.

The Taoiseach: -----in respect of the energy crisis. There are two debates. The Dáil is meeting at 2 p.m. today and will meet tomorrow. There are two Private Member's debates on energy, each of which I believe is of two hours' duration. There are plenty of opportunities for Deputies to articulate their views and for the Government to respond with regard to energy measures. There is debate-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where is the leadership?

The Taoiseach: There is a debate this week on energy. The Deputy has called for a debate on energy and there is a debate on energy this week. There are two debates.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where are the plans?

The Taoiseach: We have also just had Leaders' Questions, which were almost predominantly on energy. Three out of the four leaders raised the issue of energy, quite correctly given the scale of the crisis. I have no issue with that. Therefore, I do not believe it is fair to try to suggest we are not debating it or discussing it in the two days we have allocated this week.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: You are not doing anything.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Boyd Barrett's points, again, we have two days to get things done. We can certainly-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Can I get certainty for next week?

The Taoiseach: Hold on, please. We can certainly look at considering time and allocating-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: You are considering-----

The Taoiseach: I have always facilitated Deputy Boyd Barrett in terms of debates.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not on this one.

The Taoiseach: I always have. We have had plenty of debates.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 58; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staan</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	

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

<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		
<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>		

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

Question declared carried.

3 o'clock

Teachtairacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Planning and Development, Maritime and Valuation (Amendment) Bill 2022, without amendment.

Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: As the Taoiseach knows, the ECB has hiked mortgage interest rates by a record margin. It does so at a time when Central Statistics Office, CSO, data released today show house prices soaring above Celtic tiger levels. There are increases of 10.4% in Dublin and of more than 15% outside the capital. I would like to know what action the Government is going to take in response. In terms of the interest rate hikes, annual mortgage payments will now rise by hundreds of euro and this will prove to be the final straw for many households. We must remember that the banks were bailed out by the people when they verged on collapse. They have now returned to profitability. I put it to the Taoiseach that it is the banks that should absorb this hike and not pass it on to customers. Has the Taoiseach spoken to the Minister for Finance on this matter? Will he impress upon him the need to call in the top brass from the banks and tell them they need to protect the customer?

The Taoiseach: First of all, as the Deputy has said, the European Central Bank is independent, and because of inflation, it is taking its measures and making decisions independently to get inflation down. I know from the CSO figures released today that the number of first-time buyers is up this year as against last year. There has been quite an interesting increase in first-time buyers, and that is because of the help to buy scheme and the first-time owner's scheme

the Minister has brought in. We have good measures to help young people around affordability. For those with existing mortgages, ideally the banks should be in a position to absorb these increases and we will monitor the situation. The Minister for Finance keeps in regular contact with the banks on a range of issues, but suffice it to say this will obviously create pressure for homeowners in terms of an increase in rates. As I said, in the forthcoming budget we are doing a broad range of measures to try to help people come through this current crisis.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Earlier I asked what the Government would do to protect people from the skyrocketing cost of energy and what it intends to do to address both the cost-of-living crisis and the energy crisis, and I suggested radical and creative measures are needed. We in the Labour Party have proposed a measure that would have the dual effect of helping households struggling with bills and helping us to reach our very much-needed climate targets, and that is Labour's climate ticket. Our proposal is that the Government would introduce in the forthcoming budget a ticket for unlimited public transport journeys around Ireland for everyone for €9 per month. If the Government were to do this, even on a three-month trial basis to the end of the year, it would cost about €150 million. We believe it would have a really positive impact on so many households. We have seen it done in Germany. It was introduced there by the centre-left government to great effect in terms of addressing household bills and reducing climate emissions, encouraging more people onto public transport and out of cars. Will the Government help people in Ireland get out of their cars and get their bills out of the red by introducing a climate ticket?

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, we cut public transport fares last year by 20% and we introduced a 50% cut in fares for young people. Prior to this September we decided to waive school transport fees for the public, which caused difficulties because more people applied for places than ever before, but it meant getting more people out of cars and onto public transport. The Government is not disagreeing with the principle of what Deputy Bacik is suggesting but we have to be mindful of the practicalities. In respect of the forthcoming budget and the core package of about €5.7 billion, we have to look at a variety of measures in respect of expenditure. The sum of €150 million in one year is a sizeable allocation to just one measure. We will be increasing public expenditure but will do so across a whole range of services. We have to focus on childcare, education and a variety of other areas.

Deputy Holly Cairns: FUSS Ireland was outside Leinster House again today. We are two weeks into the new school year and there are many children and young people with special needs and disabilities who do not have appropriate school places. In Cork South-West I have been working with families since this time last year who warned the Department and pleaded for the resources to ensure their children could exercise their right to education. One child with autism spectrum disorder, ASD, whose name is Charlie, has been moved between three primary schools. The special educational needs organiser, SENO, overruled the recommendation of the most recent school, and he was then placed in a special class at second level that is not suitable for his needs. Needless to say, he has regressed due to these circumstances. Even though an ASD unit is opening in the secondary school that is closest to him, it is already oversubscribed. His mum asked how it is possible that a post-primary unit is established, but even before it opens, it is oversubscribed. These children have been in primary education, in the system, for eight years. The numbers involved are surely relatively clear. Her son's case is not an isolated one but is symptomatic of an under-resourced and dysfunctional system failing children and families, a system that fails to do the most basic planning. What are we supposed to say to these parents when they come to us for help?

The Taoiseach: First, I have given priority to special education. I met representatives of FUSS Ireland last Saturday. I met a range of disability groups last Saturday, mainly involved on the health side. There was a very significant focus on the progressing disability services, PDS, programme and its implementation and application. I have had issues with that myself. There was a series of meetings involving the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, the Minister of State at the Department of Education, Deputy Madigan, the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, and the HSE, which has resulted in the restoration of therapists to special schools over a certain timeframe.

In terms of school places themselves, we have made it clear what we want and the Department of Education, in fairness, has responded. In the past two years we have established new special schools where required. We have also brought in legislation that means schools cannot refuse children with special needs. It is the case that, over the years, post-primary did not develop to the same extent as primary level.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. Your time is up.

Deputy Holly Cairns: What do we say to these parents?

The Taoiseach: One child who does not have a school place is one child too many. While I do not know the background to the individual case, as far as I am concerned, that child should be provided for. I know the Minister will agree with me it is within the capacity of the Department of Education to provide for that child. I do not have the details of the case, but if the Deputy wants to share them with me afterwards, I will see what I can do.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Outside the Dáil today were many residents of apartments and duplex complexes, including Hunterswood and Park West. These are some of the 100,000 householders facing serious defects in their homes. They were carrying placards saying “Not our fault” because it is not their fault. They did everything right when they bought their homes. The fault is with the builders responsible, with the lack of proper regulation, and with the regime of self-certification that existed at the time. It is not their fault, but at the moment it is going to be their bills, averaging €25,000, with some facing bills of €60,000-plus to make their homes safe.

There is a report on the Government’s desk from the working group that talks about the scale of this issue. It says that the vast majority of Celtic tiger era apartments or duplexes will be affected but the majority of those people do not know they are affected yet. One in 20 homes in this State is affected by this issue. The only just and workable solution is 100% redress. That is one of the options outlined in the report.

An Ceann Comhairle: Your time is up Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have three quick questions. One, when will the Government decide on the report? Two, will the Government agree that anything it does will be retroactive and will the Taoiseach make that commitment now? Three, will the Government commit to 100% redress?

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has received that report and published it. The Government is going to consider intervention, just as we have in other areas like pyrite and mica, to which we have made very substantial and comprehensive responses. The response will be equally comprehensive on this front as well.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The Dentists Act 1985 needs to be updated as a matter of urgency. This was confirmed by the Dental Council of Ireland in its most recent submission to the Minister for Health. In October 2021, the council highlighted the fact the Act is not fit for purpose, citing certain omissions and weaknesses. While I understand updating this legislation could be a lengthy process, I am calling on the Taoiseach to expedite, with immediate effect, a revision of sections 38 and 44 of the Dentists Act 1985. We must legislate so that specialist dental practitioners such as specialist orthodontists who are deemed unfit to practice on the grounds of incapacity are not held accountable for patient care or the transfer of patient care. In such circumstances, it should be the role and the responsibility of the Dental Council of Ireland to support member practitioners and their patients to transfer and manage continued patient care. Will the Government agree to update this legislation as a matter of urgency so that the Dental Council of Ireland will have the power to carry out this function?

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister for Health about the proposal the Deputy has made regarding specific sections of the Bill. Deputy Grealish is suggesting we accelerate changes to aspects of the legislation in advance of any comprehensive overview of the Act, as I understand it. I will talk to the Minister about that.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The legislation needs to be updated and the Dental Council is calling for that to happen.

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Earlier this year the Government announced, to another fanfare, that it would give free school transport to everyone. That has caused untold trouble, unease and anguish for everybody. The Government must have known that the system was not fit for purpose in any case and has not been for a long number of years and now it is chaos. The fact is 15,000 children are now being shut out completely, some of whom had places or concessionary tickets. This has caused absolute bedlam but the Government wanted announce it and praise it. No thought went into it at all and it has had an adverse effect on school transport. Things are far worse now than they were any other year and they were bad enough previously. What is the Government going to do to correct the unholy mess it has created for pupils who cannot get places on school buses?

The Taoiseach: First of all, as part of our response to the cost-of-living issue, we waived all fees for the school transport scheme. The measure is saving families up to €650 and the Deputy calls that a mess.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is a mess.

The Taoiseach: It is saving families €650 and the Deputy's response is that it is a mess.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government has made a mess of it.

The Taoiseach: Some €280 million is being provided. More than 124,000 tickets have issued-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where are the buses? Where are the drivers?

The Taoiseach: That is an increase of 21,000 over last year. That is good news. There have been challenges with the scheme but the bottom line is that we did not hang around here. There was a cost-of-living crisis and we said we will move to reduce it for families and get rid of the

fee, and we did. Of course, this created issues this September-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where are the bus drivers and buses?

The Taoiseach: The Department is working and Bus Éireann is doing everything it can to process applications and issue tickets as soon as extra buses and drivers are sourced.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government could not do a thing for them.

The Taoiseach: The alternative would have been to do nothing.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government does nothing most of the time.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I met with families from Donegal Town, Inver and Ramelton in my constituency outside the Dáil today. Families from all across the country were at the gates of Leinster House as part of Cystic Fibrosis Ireland's support the Kaftrio 35 campaign. Some 35 young children with cystic fibrosis are currently deprived of a groundbreaking new drug due to a pricing dispute between the HSE and the provider, Vertex. It is wrong that these children should continue to be deprived. The Taoiseach should act to ensure the Minister for Health and the HSE respond to make sure this drug is provided to these young people. It can alter their lives significantly and save the State money in the long run, which seems to be the only thing the State understands.

The Taoiseach: I am familiar with the issue. I thank the Deputy for raising it. I am acutely aware of the anguish of parents of children with cystic fibrosis and their eagerness to see this drug made available for their children. There is ongoing dialogue between the HSE and Vertex, the drug manufacturer. Efforts are ongoing to ensure that this drug can be made available to those 35 children currently being excluded from it. We were involved in earlier campaigns and got it through, and we are anxious to get this sorted as well. I will talk again to the Minister and raise this issue with him.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have ten remaining Deputies and only 11 minutes. Deputies might ask 30-second questions, please. I call Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I wish to ask the Taoiseach about the mental health care and recovery centre in Bantry. The Mental Health Commission has recommended reducing the bed capacity at this facility from 18 beds down to 11. I ask Government to reject absolutely this recommendation. The report and request are fundamentally flawed. It does not take into account the geographic nature of west Cork and fails to mention one of the biggest settlements in the area, which is Castletownbere. At this time, we should be investing more in mental health. We should be increasing bed capacity in our mental health facilities, not decreasing it. I ask the Government to do whatever it takes to reject the suggestion by the Mental Health Commission to reduce beds.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has raised an important issue. The Mental Health Commission is there to make sure proper standards are applied across the mental health arena. On the registration of the mental health care and recovery approved centre in Bantry, the commission made a recommendation or decision that should be reduced from a total number of registered beds from 18 to 11 due to its concerns over the size of residents' bedrooms in the centre. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has requested a detailed report from the HSE on the matter. The HSE is currently examining all options available to it. It is in dialogue with the commis-

sion as part of the regulatory process and again, we have to work with the best interests of the residents in mind from a health and safety viewpoint but also for the provision of appropriate treatments. I will ask that there be further engagement and talk to the Minister in that regard.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: Up until December 2017, tenants who paid rent on private property were entitled to a tax rebate. This tax credit was available to all tenants of flats, apartments and houses. I personally remember and welcomed receiving this rebate. I believe it is important that we consider reintroducing it to assist in alleviating the financial stress experienced by our renters. By reintroducing the tax rebate, tenants will receive extra cash in their pockets. I hope this can be considered in the forthcoming budget.

The Taoiseach: With regard to the Deputy's budget recommendation, I know the Minister with responsibility for housing is working on all these issues. Government must consider a whole range of measures. I will certainly present the Deputy's perspective. It is one that others have put forward as well.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to return to the issue of the debacle of school transport. The Taoiseach said 124,000 tickets have been allocated. The scheme carried 121,000 people last year. The fact is-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It did. The fact is that less concessionary tickets will be available this year than ever before. Why was priority not given to those people who applied on time? It has significantly reduced the number of concessionary tickets that are available. Very many of those people have been using the service for years. The Government needs to find a solution for those children.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I disagree with the Deputy's figures.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: They are the Taoiseach's figures

The Taoiseach: Leaving out special transport, an extra 21,000 tickets have been issued over last year. That is significant. There are pluses to what has happened. If we did nothing, we could have managed the existing numbers and left everything alone but we were anxious to reduce costs for families, which are significant. A figure of €650 for many families is a significant reduction in the cost.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is added cost for those families.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Western Care Association has a service level agreement with the HSE on whose behalf it provides support and services to people with intellectual disabilities across County Mayo. It employs more than 1,400 staff. It is an amazing organisation. However, most care and community sector workers have not received a pay rise in the last 14 years. The Government and the Department of Health control the funding of this organisation and, therefore, have ultimate control over whether the wages increase or not. I ask the Taoiseach and the Government to respond to the core funding issue around section 39 organisations and the underfunding of wages of workers in these organisations.

The Taoiseach: Again, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is very much aware of this issue, which has been longstanding over the years, but is now gaining particular importance because of the new public service pay agreement that is being concluded by the Min-

ister, which is welcome, and also with the Building Momentum agreement. There had been an agreement prior to Building Momentum with regard to the larger section 39 organisations. Again, just like every pay issue, there has to be a process to work out the issues. The Minister is examining the issue right now.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: On 17 May, Leonard O'Brien, a two-year-old Irish child, was taken forcibly from his mother's arms in the French city of Antibes by French gendarmes who arrived at the door unannounced and armed. The genesis of this is an action taken by Ms Sarah Jane O'Brien who hails from County Clare. Her ex-boyfriend took an action under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. The child was taken from its mother. We cannot cast this aside as a civil custody case or a civil matter. This is state-led abduction of a child. The Government and French Embassy are aware. We want the Taoiseach to have oversight. Just like the Government had oversight of the Ibrahim Halawa case in 2017, I ask the Taoiseach and the Government to have oversight of this. I am a dad to three smallies. I cannot even begin to comprehend what Sarah Jane is going through. This child is still being bottle-fed and in nappies and did not deserve to be taken by armed gendarmes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. It might be a matter for a Topical Issue if the Deputy wishes to table it.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy's consistent raising of the situation in the public domain. It is a very difficult and tragic situation when a child is forcibly removed from its mother in that context. I do not know the full background of the case in its entirety. Normally, we would not perhaps discuss it in a public arena but the Deputy has to raise it and I appreciate that. Normally, our consular officials work with families overseas who have challenging issues and difficulties and so on and represent them. We have a degree of oversight in that manner. Of course, the Hague convention is in place and legal issues would have to be navigated to see if we can get a resolution to this issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: I invite the Deputy to table it as a Topical Issue matter if he thinks it would be helpful. I call Deputy Bruton.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Ceann Comhairle knows we are facing a climate crisis as well as the energy crisis. Does the Taoiseach agree that we now need a national energy resilience campaign to reduce our reliance on imported energy? The Taoiseach will know that other member states are proposing such a campaign to cut 10% of their energy use and up to 25% at peak time times.

I would suggest seven S's: shallow retrofits; smart controls and meters; switching providers and modes; sharing platforms; storage capacity; solar; and saving on waste. We could build a campaign around these with relatively little money but a large impact, but a plan would be needed in each of these areas to deliver the campaign for homes and businesses, which are willing to adopt it.

The Taoiseach: I would agree 100% with the Deputy. We do need such a campaign. The Minister is going to launch a communications campaign in relation to energy demand reduction, but I think the Deputy has outlined a very good list, one that we should work on as a country. Irrespective of the crisis, we need to move much more quickly in terms of reducing our dependency on fossil fuels in particular and move as fast as we can on the-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach, but I am trying to move as fast as I can as

well.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will speak as quickly as I can.

I wish to highlight the childcare pressures in my constituency. I know of a 41-year-old professional woman who has a four-and-a-half-month-old baby. If she gets a childcare place for her baby in order for her to return to work, it will cost her between €1,200 and €1,300 per month. She is a single mother who gets the one-parent family payment, but that is offset by tax on maternity benefit. The cost of childcare in my constituency is 60% higher than it is in Carlow and 30% higher than the national average, and that is if someone can even get it.

The Taoiseach: I do not doubt what the Deputy is saying in terms of the cost of childcare, particularly how it is higher in certain locations than others, but it is high across the country generally.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Caring for a baby is the same no matter where one does it.

The Taoiseach: Yes, but I am just saying generally. There are a number of mechanisms by which we can intervene depending on the type of care involved in looking after a child in whatever context. In the last budget, we focused primarily on trying to get better working conditions for those working in the childcare arena. Thankfully, in the past two weeks, an employment regulation order has been agreed, which will lead to an increase in pay and conditions. The next phase will be the upcoming budget, where we will have to look at affordability for parents in terms of the cost of childcare. That is something that we are examining.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I wish to raise with the Taoiseach the unacceptable and ongoing delays in the payment of the pandemic bonus to healthcare workers. So far, only 1,867 healthcare workers have received the payment and there is now talk of the bonus's provision being outsourced in order to identify who else is entitled to it, for example, home care workers, nursing home workers, paramedics and section 38 or 39 workers. Will the Taoiseach please provide an update on when these many thousands of front-line workers will get this long overdue payment, which is especially needed now because of the cost of living crisis?

An Ceann Comhairle: We will take the remaining two questioners because we are out of time.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I will ask the same question. The pandemic recognition payment was broadly welcomed, but it is ludicrous that workers who do not work directly for the HSE have still not received their payments. The goodwill that greeted the bonus has largely diminished because of the delay. Workers want to know when they will get their payments.

Deputy Marian Harkin: For the sixth time since last October, I am raising the issue of the number of people waiting at Sligo University Hospital. There are 56 today. Sligo University Hospital is always in the top four or five hospitals in terms of the number of patients waiting. It has a capacity of 359 beds. Compare that with Limerick hospital, which is always the worst in class. The number of patients waiting on beds as a percentage of bed capacity in Limerick is 13%. In Sligo, it is 16%. This is consistently the case. While some progress has been made around a community hub, I am calling for urgent intervention this winter.

The Taoiseach: On the pandemic payment, which was the subject matter of the first two

questions, 122,000 staff have now received the payment, representing the vast majority of those who are eligible and employed by the HSE. The HSE's figures reported for the week ending 9 September 2022 show 85,078 eligible HSE staff and 37,589 eligible section 38 staff in voluntary hospitals have received the payment. I am told that the total at the moment is 122,667. That is the figure I have been given via the Department from the HSE. However, there are eligible workers in other sectors that have not yet received the payment. I will engage with the Minister in relation to that.

In terms of Sligo University Hospital, there are broader issues across a number of hospitals. There are a number of factors that can lead to overcrowding, for example, the flow through the hospital and irregular discharges. In some cases, governance frameworks have been a factor. Where the HSE has intervened on the governance front, dividends have emerged. I just want to put that into the mix. I am not saying that is the issue in Sligo. There are capacity issues and, unfortunately, Covid continues to have a long and lingering effect on health. That is a big challenge for us in the winter. I appreciate the point the Deputy has raised.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes questions on policy or legislation and a great deal more besides.

Reappointment of Members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann, noting that the Government agreed on 27th July, 2022, to propose, for the approval of Dáil Éireann, the reappointment of the persons concerned to be members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, and pursuant to sections 9 and 10 of the Legal Services Regulation Act, 2015, approves the reappointment of Sara Moorhead, Geraldine Clarke, Shane Galligan, Dermott Jewell and Síona Ryan, with effect from 1st October, 2022, by the Government to be members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, who shall hold office for a further period not exceeding two and three years respectively, from the date of reappointment, in accordance with that Act.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, or in the Orders of the Dáil of 28th June, 2022 and 5th July, 2022, Questions for oral answer, following those set down to the Minister for Social Protection on 14th July, 2022, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Minister for Rural and Community Development

Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications

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Minister for Transport

Minister for Finance

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Minister for Defence

Minister for Education

Minister for Social Protection

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister for Justice

Minister for Health

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Minister for Rural and Community Development

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 30th July, 2020, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications.

Question put and agreed to.

Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Motion

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

That the Order of the Dáil of 29th June, 2021, relating to waiver requests on pre-legislative scrutiny is hereby rescinded and the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business are hereby amended as recommended in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform dated 13th July, 2022, entitled “*Amendment of Standing Orders relating to pre-legislative scrutiny of Government Bills*”, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd July, 2022.

Question put and agreed to.

Dáil Éireann
Ceisteanna - Questions

Departmental Reports

1. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the annual report of his Department for 2021 will be published. [35871/22]

2. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the annual report of his Department for 2021 will be published. [36011/22]

3. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the annual report of his Department for 2021 will be published. [36170/22]

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach his views on his Department’s recently published annual report 2021. [44836/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, together.

My Department’s annual report for 2021 was published on *gov.ie* and laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas last July. The report sets out the work of my Department in 2021 to deliver under the strategic priorities set out in the Department’s three-year statement of strategy.

My Department continues to work at the centre to ensure that the policies developed support the Government’s commitment to developing Ireland in a sustainable way that supports economic development and social progress. Through the work of the ten Cabinet committees supported by my Department, a range of cross-Government work was advanced during 2021 in line with the strategic priorities set out, for example, management of the whole-of-government response to Covid-19, including the national vaccination programme roll-out. The economic recovery plan, with a progress report on implementation published in June, is helping to drive a jobs-rich recovery and supporting the economy in transitioning towards a decarbonised and digital economy. Among the deliverables progressed is a new national digital strategy, *Harnessing Digital - The Digital Ireland Framework*, co-ordinated through my Department.

Other work included: the publication of the Housing for All plan, an ambitious and far-reaching plan to address the provision of housing, increase the supply of housing and provide a sustainable housing system into the future; supporting the cross-Government work to manage the ongoing economic and political impacts of Brexit; driving delivery of our commitments on the shared island initiative on a whole-of-government basis through the shared island unit in my Department and the shared island fund; and supporting Ireland’s role in Europe and the world, including through my participation in the European Council, Ireland’s seat on the UN Security Council and with respect to ongoing developments regarding the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol.

Other social policy work advanced during 2021 included wider health service reforms, further education and special education needs provision and finalisation of the White Paper on direct provision. Other work included: delivery of an initial well-being framework for Ireland and a supporting information hub, which are being developed to better understand and measure our progress as a country; the completion of the work of the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality; the launch of the revised national development plan, setting out the roadmap for in-

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vestment of €165 billion in new and upgraded infrastructure over the decade ahead; the signing into law of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021; the establishment of the marine planning framework; the publication of the Climate Action Plan 2021; and three legislative programmes published during 2021 setting out priority legislation across Government.

My Department's priorities for the coming period will include advancing work to protect energy supply and mitigate the impact of the rising cost of energy; a continued focus on the Government's humanitarian response to the situation in Ukraine; economic recovery and investment; driving delivery of Housing for All and measures on climate action; and progressing health and wider social reforms, EU engagement and Northern Ireland, including continuing to advance our shared island agenda. Furthermore, my Department will continue to be responsive to new and emerging challenges.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have five questioners. The Taoiseach will have time to respond. We have to keep the questions to about a minute each. I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for setting out the detail of the Department's annual report. I am glad to say that we, in the Oireachtas special Joint Committee on Gender Equality, are on track to complete our work in December and to produce a report on the implementation of the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality. I look forward to engaging with the Taoiseach on that.

In terms of strategic priorities for our economic development and social progress, one glaring issue which requires prioritisation by the Taoiseach and Government is childcare and early years education. The State is currently investing millions into a mostly privately run, for-profit sector, but we are still no closer to the sort of public, universal childcare service for which the Labour Party has long advocated. Our current system is failing parents, professionals, providers and, most importantly, children. Every day, I hear from constituents who cannot access any place in childcare and this is particularly the case for babies who are under 12 months old. One woman who was very distressed contacted me. Her baby is yet to be born, but she anticipates that she will have immense difficulty in finding any crèche place, let alone one that is affordable, particularly until her child reaches 12 months old. We have seen recent reports in *The Irish Times* citing the average cost per month for childcare in Finland as €150. The cost in Dublin is almost ten times that at €1,100, €1,200 and €1,300 per month per child. We have called for the Government to introduce a radical and creative measure in this budget to cap childcare costs at €200 per month, per child. We believe that sort of investment by the State would cost approximately €270 million per year to do that. We believe that would be a real investment in an equal early years approach to children, children's rights and to that ensuring parents would have some help and some support in meeting these exorbitant rising costs that they are facing with childcare, which are like a second mortgage for so many.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The annual report speaks about the role of Ireland in the world. I would like to ask the Taoiseach whether the role he envisages is one of allying with and participating in NATO. I ask the Taoiseach whether the Irish Government participated in the fifth meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which took place at the Ramstein US air base in Germany, which also happens to be where the NATO military headquarters are based. After the meeting, the US Secretary of Defense said, "I am extremely proud of the progress on the discussion to intensify our efforts to support Ukraine and strengthen our NATO alliance." He was speaking there about the 50 countries that attended. To be clear, and we have been

clear and consistent throughout, we are absolutely opposed to Putin's imperialist invasion of Ukraine. We are also opposed to the attempt to use that horrific invasion to drive militarisation, to undermine what is left of neutrality here and to try to rebuild the idea of joining NATO. It is clear from that approach by US Secretary of Defense that that is the aim and that is what is happening here. Did the Irish Government participate?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: In recent weeks we have seen queues of hundreds of people, renters, who have been going for viewings. We have had reports of a student being asked for intimate photographs from a landlord. We have had students who cannot find anywhere to live who are sleeping rough. We have had a homeless woman who is sleeping in her car on a beach and having to wash in the sea as she has nowhere else to wash. Our rents are among the highest in Europe. House prices have surpassed the Celtic tiger peak, according to data released by the CSO today. Homelessness has reached record levels. There are more people living in emergency accommodation now than at any other point in the history of the State. Young people who have skills that we desperately need are being forced to emigrate. After failing to come even close to meeting any of the Government's housing targets last year, the Taoiseach promised that this year would be a year for delivery. Instead, and this is not mentioned in the areas of the report dealing with housing, the capital spend on housing at this year is actually 21% lower than it was at the same time last year. This means that none of the targets on delivering social, affordable or cost-rental homes will be met. I want to ask the Taoiseach why the Government is failing to meet any of the targets that it is setting itself in terms of housing. What is it doing to urgently address this? What emergency action will it take to ensure that people can get the housing that they desperately need?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In the Taoiseach's capacity as part of the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality, I have raised with him on a number of occasions in the last year the issue of Accessible Community Transport Southside Ltd., ACTS, which is a door-to-door, voluntary-run, not-for-profit transport service for people with wheelchairs. It moves hundreds of people who otherwise could not get out of their homes to go to doctor appointments, to get around, to have a social existence and who cannot use the normal public transport system. I warned the Taoiseach that it was going to go out of business for the lack of approximately €250,000. Despite the suggestions that something would be done and that it would be looked at I was absolutely shocked to receive an e-mail from that service today saying that it is winding up. It is gone. We see these ACTS buses all around the city. People in wheelchairs are already obstructed from having equality of access to life, to services, to their doctors and so on and now their service is gone because of the lack of €250,000 and the refusal of the Government to give them the money to provide this service. It is gone and finished. Next week, people who have doctor appointments will have no transport to take them there. They have asked again and again for specialised transport for people with wheelchairs, with severe mobility problems, with disabilities and so on, to be seen as an integral part of our public transport system and for that to be properly funded but because of a failure to do that, that service is now gone. I ask the Taoiseach what he will do about this because many vulnerable people now have no transport service. It is shocking and it is shameful.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Taoiseach increased the minimum wage this year by less than 3%, which is in real terms a very serious pay cut for the country's lowest-paid workers. Now he intends to increase it for next year by less than 8%, which is another pay cut in real terms. His annual report talks of building a better society. How can he say that he is doing that when a worker in this country who is on €11.30 an hour cannot live a decent life? This increase would

not feed the pigeons. I want to invite the Taoiseach to come down to the Grand Parade this Saturday to observe the Cork cost-of-living demonstration. He will see thousands of people who are anxious about heating their homes this winter, who are discontented about the lack of action from his Government and who are demanding real change - not token change, but real change - in this budget. It might be a useful way for him to spend an hour of his time this Saturday.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I want to raise with the Taoiseach the issue of the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, DSGBV, which was launched before the summer. Of course, the decision by the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, to publish the strategy's implementation plan was also welcome. It placed an emphasis and on obligation on all relevant Departments, including the Taoiseach's Department, with regard to that. I understand that the oversight of this legislation and policy rests with the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality, which is chaired by the Taoiseach. We have previously raised concerns about this particular committee and how it operates and, particularly, about the fact that it meets so infrequently to be able to oversee this strategy. Perhaps the Taoiseach would set out in practice how the committee is working in terms of oversight of the strategy. The strategy also commits to the establishment of a high-level oversight board, chaired by the Secretaries General of the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Justice, with a secretariat from the Department of the Taoiseach. Perhaps the Taoiseach could confirm that both are now up and running and that the Taoiseach's commitments and obligations in the areas of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are to be included in the Department's key priorities in the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has only two and a half minutes to respond, so his answer will be a bit truncated, if he does not mind.

The Taoiseach: Yes. A whole range of issues were raised there. Deputy Bacik raised the issue of childcare. The difficulty is that if we were to move completely to a State system, it would involve very significant engagement with stakeholders to dramatically and radically transform the area. As I said, we dealt in the last budget with a significant allocation for pay and conditions. Working between employers and employees, an agreement was arrived at in terms of the two employment regulation orders. This was good, but this year we have to increase affordability. If the Deputy wants to send the details of her proposal to us, I know the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, is working on proposals for the forthcoming budget in respect of childcare. Childcare is very expensive in this country. We have to try consistently to get the cost down in a programmatic way that sustains into the future from a public finance and expenditure point of view. We are increasing expenditure on childcare significantly year on year.

On the question raised by Deputy Murphy, I am not aware of the specific meeting in question, but I would say I do not believe he is correct in his analysis that people are using the war in Ukraine to drive the militarisation of the world or NATO. I think that is a perverse analysis because nobody wanted the war in Ukraine except Putin. The leaders of European countries like Germany and France, including Chancellor Scholz and President Macron, did everything they possibly could to prevent the war and to stop a war. War has consequences. When a leader wages war in an unprovoked and brutal fashion on a neighbouring country simply because he believes the country does not exist and is possessed by some sort of 19th century imperialist view of the world, then the neighbours of that neighbour have to take note. The Continent has to take note. We cannot have an endless continuance of that policy. That is why people closer to Russia are taking extra measures to protect themselves, unfortunately. It is why Finland and Sweden have applied to join NATO. They see it. I met the Finnish Prime Minister and President. They are balanced and reasonable people, who have navigated a relationship with Russia

for a long time. Their view is that this brutal invasion of Ukraine has changed everything. All they were told in their childhoods and the ultimate fear came to be realised in the invasion. People in Estonia, Poland and the Baltic states more generally are all very anxious and worried about what has happened. That is the natural response that has occurred. The vast majority of people obviously would have preferred if this had never happened, and that we did not find ourselves in this situation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Can we get two or three minutes extra? There are only one or two questions-----

The Taoiseach: Deputy O’Callaghan raised the question of renters. Housing for All is our strategic response to housing. It is the most substantive housing policy. I have seen nothing near it from any Opposition party in terms of substance, breadth or depth. The reality is we will need a range of measures to deal with housing and homelessness. Unfortunately-----

An Ceann Comhairle: May I interrupt? We will add three or four minutes to the reply, if Members are happy with that. Let us say, four minutes. Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The population is rising, and is more than 5 million. There are more Irish people coming back than Irish people leaving. The housing issue is not just Irish; it is European. It is an issue everywhere, basically.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: My question was about the Government missing its own targets.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy made his points. I am addressing all the points he made, because I have written down what he said. We need to study the facts. The bottom line is that a number of factors have really conspired against us, Covid being one, but more importantly, the war and the increase in the cost of commodities. However, we are responding to that. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform reformed the public tender framework so that builders would not be caught for the entirety of the inflationary increase and they could continue with social housing projects. This year we have completed the highest number of social housing projects on record, between approved social housing bodies and local authorities. Likewise, we are making progress on affordable homes and cost rental. There is a suite of measures. The new shared equity scheme is gaining huge traction with young purchasers and the help to buy scheme is impacting on people. I mentioned earlier there has been an increase in the number of first-time buyers.

However, there are still huge challenges. We need to build more houses and get houses built. There are many objections to houses. There are people and politicians objecting to housing developments. Leadership needs to start in this House and come from political leaders in these issues. I believe it is the number one crisis over the constant period that will endure unless we continue to facilitate the construction of houses and not always seek to block, block and block. Younger people, in particular, deserve to have access to affordable houses. We need to get up to 35,000 units at least being built annually. We will do everything we possibly can from a Government perspective. Some €4 billion a year has been allocated to housing - way above what was allocated before this Government came into office. The Minister, Deputy O’Brien, has been very innovative in his response to this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Taoiseach address the other couple of questions?

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The Taoiseach: I am coming to them. Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the issue of the transport service in south Dublin. The funding was obviously coming through some agency prior to that, was it not?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was brought up with the Taoiseach and-----

The Taoiseach: I know, but what agency are they dealing with?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: All agencies.

The Taoiseach: The Government did not meet as a Government and say they were not getting funding. The Deputy should know that. He made the political point that the Government refused it. We did not.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They asked for the money.

The Taoiseach: Who did they ask?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They asked the Department.

The Taoiseach: Normally, in terms of groups in that specific area, funding is provided through a particular agency or whatever. I do not know the full background to the case.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The service is gone now. It is unbelievable.

The Taoiseach: Well, there must be other reasons and factors we need to tease through.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They have not got the money - the €250,000. That is it.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Barry raised the issue of the minimum wage, which is a 7.6% increase. Last year's increase was higher than inflation, actually.

Deputy Mick Barry: Last year's increase was higher than inflation?

The Taoiseach: That is my understanding, yes.

Deputy Mick Barry: At 2.9%?

The Taoiseach: In terms of the year it applied to, yes. This is just narrowly lower. It is an independent commission, not the Government, that decides the minimum wage. We want to move up as quickly as we can to a new living wage. For the first time in the report, a living wage has now been identified, so progress has been made. The Deputy is aware the vast majority on the minimum wage are not the main income earners in families. We have to continue to improve, and we will. We all agree on that - maybe not all. There is an independent commission that examines this issue in great detail and takes all the factors into account, including employment and so on, to facilitate an increase in the minimum wage.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are going to have to move on.

The Taoiseach: The practice has been to accept the recommendation of an independent commission. However, in the budget and the cost of living package, we will be taking other measures to help people on the minimum wage to get through the current crisis.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Grand Parade?

The Taoiseach: I have an official State event here on Saturday.

An Ceann Comhairle: We need to move on to Question No. 5, from Deputy Bacik.

Departmental Bodies

5. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the parliamentary liaison unit within his Department. [35872/22]

The Taoiseach: The parliamentary liaison unit in my Department assists Government in its relationship with the Oireachtas. It works with the Office of the Government Chief Whip on issues that arise at the Business Committee and the Committee on Dáil Reform and Standing Orders, including Dáil reform proposals and amendments to Standing Orders. The unit supports the Office of the Government Chief Whip in the implementation of the Government's legislative programme. In addition, the unit assists the office of the leader of the Green Party in work relating to Cabinet, Cabinet committees and oversight of the implementation of the programme for Government. In carrying out these duties, it provides detailed information on upcoming matters in the Dáil and Seanad; highlights any new Oireachtas reform issues, and provides assistance in engaging with the new processes arising from Dáil reform. The unit is staffed by 3.5 whole time equivalent staff: one principal officer, one administrative officer, 0.5 higher executive officer, and one clerical officer.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for providing the information on the parliamentary liaison unit, which, as we know, provides detailed information on matters upcoming in the Dáil and Seanad and carries out a number of other functions. I want to raise with the Taoiseach a particular issue pertaining to a service which has been providing a similar service to the public, namely, the Citizens Information service, which over some decades now has been providing a very important face-to-face service across our communities but about which we are hearing increasing concerns. We have seen changes to the service, the closure of face-to-face offices, a failure to reopen offices after Covid and a whole-scale movement online of these vital information services. Indeed, over the summer, this issue was raised extensively on "Liveline", as people around the country spoke of their concern about hearing their local services were being closed.

4 o'clock

In my constituency, Dublin Bay South, we held a public meeting in Rathmines about the failure to reopen the local office there. Our local Labour Party councillor, Mary Freehill, and I both had extensive engagement with members of the public about their concerns on this issue. We had a big turnout at a town hall meeting we held in Rathmines and we heard from those who had been volunteers with the service, and more importantly, from those who had been using the service, including clients of the service and those who had benefited from the face-to-face access to information that it had provided to them. A whole-scale movement online goes against the ethos of the Citizens Information centres and service. Labour's Frank Cluskey had originally insisted on the establishment of Citizens Information services in order that people would not effectively be dependent on Dáil Deputies' clinics to find out their rights and to be able to engage with Departments and local authorities. Now we have a situation where we are seeing face-to-face and community services being stripped down and closed down. I appeal to the Taoiseach and to the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, to ensure there is

sufficient resourcing to enable the maintenance and retention of face-to-face community services, such as Citizens Information services of this kind, which have provided such an important bridge to many local communities and individuals in accessing information about their rights and the sort of entitlements they have from the State. Without this sort of face-to-face service, many disadvantaged individuals and households are really affected and feel they have nowhere to turn.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The role of the parliamentary liaison unit is to ensure that dialogue and so on take place on the implementation of the Government's legislative programme. Part of the agreed Government legislative programme is a referendum to enshrine water in public ownership in the Constitution. This is a matter of considerable public debate. A mass movement defeated water charges and in the aftermath, the Government said there would be no problem about having a referendum and that we would have public ownership of water. It is six years since Deputy Joan Collins first introduced her Bill to enshrine water in public ownership in the Constitution. That is deliberately bogged down in Committee Stage. It has been a few months since the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage said we should not worry and that we would have a referendum this year or early next year. For the water workers, who are due to transfer from councils across the country to Irish Water on 1 January, that is not good enough. From their point of view, they have no guarantee that Irish Water will not be privatised in the future and they are being transferred over to a company that is a semi-State company now but could be privatised in the future, unless there is a referendum. They want a date. When will the referendum on the public ownership of water take place?

Deputy Martin Kenny: Nearly a year has passed since the Government agreed the redress scheme for mother and baby home survivors, many of whom are elderly and getting on in life. I seek a reassurance from the Taoiseach that the legislation to progress this scheme will be published and that the scheme will be opened as a matter of urgency. As we know, many of the unfortunate survivors of these homes are at the gates of the Dáil again today, as they have been many times in the past.

I also want to briefly raise with the Taoiseach the matter of the decision by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, to renege on his promise of an independent review of the mother and baby home confidential committee testimony. I am not sure whether the Taoiseach was aware of the decision to renege on this commitment to survivors. If so, can he explain why the Minister did not engage directly with the survivors earlier this year on his decision? After a lot of missteps by this Government and those before it in dealing with institutional abuse, it is simply unacceptable for it to be left to journalists to uncover the Minister's decisions. I understand that it may be hard for the Taoiseach to hear this but survivors have lost trust in the Government on this issue and that is the reality. The Minister, with the support of the Taoiseach, needs to re-engage with survivors as a matter of urgency and ensure the redress scheme is put in place.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do not know how many schemes there are where it has been suggested that somebody needs to co-ordinate between Departments on the issue of disability. It has also been suggested that the Department of the Taoiseach should take a lead role on this. We should bear in mind that we signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. I find the Taoiseach's earlier response on what has happened to be shocking. This was a door-to-door transport service for people with powered wheelchairs and three or four buses used to take hundreds of people every day, for years, to medical appointments and to allow them to have a social life because they cannot use the

normal public transport system. By the way, this service did not get a cent from the Department of Transport and it has been begging for a year for money to replace its buses and to deal with a financial shortfall. This company should not even have to exist because public transport should be doing its job. It is a not-for-profit involving mostly volunteers and the service is gone. Some of the most vulnerable people have no way to get to doctor's appointments and to get out of the isolation of their homes next week.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is no time left to reply. I call Deputy Joan Collins.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I appeal to the Taoiseach to do something about this.

Deputy Joan Collins: I want to briefly come in on a point Deputy Paul Murphy raised on the referendum on the public ownership of water. When will we see that coming through? My Bill, which was backed by the Right2Water campaign, has been buried in Committee Stage for the last number of years and at this stage we are told that a referendum on water will only take place along with a referendum on housing being a human right. Can the Taoiseach tell us when that will happen?

The Taoiseach: There are a number of issues there and in fairness to Deputy Martin Kenny I did not answer his last question-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: I understand that.

The Taoiseach: -----in the last bout, for which I apologise. There is national implementation board oversight between the Department of Justice and my Department and that is working well. We launched and published the strategy itself just before the summer recess and that will report to the Cabinet subcommittee on social affairs and equality. We have outlined that to the Deputy's party leader and to the other party leaders when we consulted them prior to the publication of the strategy, so we have to give it time.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It meets so infrequently.

The Taoiseach: No concerns were really raised at that stage. It was only just before the summer. We will allay any concerns we can and there will be proper oversight of the implementation of the strategy.

On the issues the Deputy raised on the survivors of mother and baby homes, to be fair to the Minister overall, this Government has moved on a range of issues and has got action and delivery. The Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022, for example, was published and the general scheme of the mother and baby institutions payment scheme Bill that the Deputy raised was published on 29 March. My understanding is that it has gone through pre-legislative scrutiny. In any event, the intention is to take it through in this session before Christmas. We will work with the Members of the House to progress that. Then there is the legislation on exhumation, which has been passed and published, so a lot of work has been done right across the board. A memorialisation centre for the inner city is important and a range of massive investment will happen there.

Then there is the issue the Deputy raised-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: The review of the confidential committee testimony.

The Taoiseach: Again, the Minister is in constant contact with survivor organisations.

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There are limits to how he can interfere with the commission because of the legal framework governing commissions of investigation and the manner in which they are set up and that has been problematic but he wants to publish in full the testimonies and he will work with survivor organisations to discuss that issue and other issues.

Deputy Bacik raised the issue of-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Citizens Information offices.

The Taoiseach: I would share the Deputy's concerns and I have heard reports on a change in the non-opening of Citizens Information centres. They have been one of the great and enduring civic actions of citizen empowerment and participation down through the years and I would be a strong advocate of them. When I was Lord Mayor of Cork, I had the honour of granting the freedom of the city to Maureen Curtis-Black, who was a great early advocate of citizens information. I will come back to the Deputy on that and check out exactly what is happening with that. These are issues that should evolve over time and having an online service should be complementary. We know that not all people are in a position to access online information and sometimes that human interaction matters in allaying concerns that certain people may have.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach. I will continue to engage with him.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Paul Murphy should acknowledge that significant progress has been made in recent years in cementing the public ownership dimension of Irish Water in terms of the State structure that has been introduced. There is no question about that. I do not believe there is any reason for workers to be concerned. The fundamental issue around the referendum on water is control of a natural resource, besides the mechanisms by which it is managed. Be it an agency or local authorities, that is a matter for ongoing debate. It is State-owned and the State is the shareholder. It is a precious resource on which we must continue to work. The Minister has committed to a referendum on it. It is a referendum that will deal with the broader issue of ownership of water.

Deputy Paul Murphy: When will it be?

The Taoiseach: I said he is working on it. We will get a timeline when we are ready for it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will it be this year?

The Taoiseach: Lads, we have had two years of Covid.

Deputy Paul Murphy: So the Taoiseach could not progress a referendum in Covid.

The Taoiseach: We could not have had a referendum during Covid. We have a lot going on.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are way over time. I know it is the first day back but please let the Taoiseach complete his response.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Thirty seconds for my question.

The Taoiseach: We went overboard on the first question to facilitate Deputies but they are milking it now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There will be no more facilitation.

The Taoiseach: I can see that.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Iron lady.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Boyd Barrett's point, generally speaking transport for special needs was financed through the education or health Departments. Many NGOs and not-for-profits were financed by the health Department in respect of transport facilities. That is the point I was asking him about.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I asked the Departments responsible for health and disability. They refused.

The Taoiseach: Can the Deputy send me a detailed email on that, outlining the background? He is saying they never got money.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I think they got some money, but not-----

The Taoiseach: The Deputy should give me the full details and we will follow it up. Give me the full background and we will see where we can identify a potential source of revenue.

The last question was from Deputy Joan Collins and dealt with the referendum as well.

Deputy Joan Collins: Is there no date?

The Taoiseach: I do not have the date.

Deputy Joan Collins: It will be never-never.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are moving on and there is less time left for the questions now.

The Taoiseach: I was elected to a local authority in 1985. What was the major issue of the day? Water.

Deputy Joan Collins: You have still not sorted it out.

The Taoiseach: It is well sorted. The only issue is it gave campaign fodder for some of you people around the table. We had dealt with it by the mid-1990s, and then there was a by-election somewhere in Dublin and the Labour Party-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The only issue for me is timing, and we are running late.

European Parliament

6. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the extent to which he had discussions during his recent visit to the European Parliament. [30694/22]

7. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his visit and address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg. [30841/22]

8. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his visit and address to the European Parliament. [34513/22]

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The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 to 8, inclusive, together.

I visited Strasbourg on 7 and 8 June. I began my visit by meeting representatives of the Council of Europe to mark Ireland's six-month presidency of that body and took the opportunity to visit the European Court of Human Rights and meet with Irish staff members in that court.

At the invitation of the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, I had the honour to address the plenary session of Parliament on 8 June. I reflected on the 50 years since Ireland voted to join what is now the European Union. Our membership has been transformative, with an overwhelmingly positive impact across all dimensions of our society. I expressed Ireland's strong support for Ukraine in the face of the immoral war being waged against it by Russia, and for its application for membership of the European Union.

Membership is the most powerful tool we possess to enlarge the sphere of democracy, peace and security in our region and in my contribution, I set out my view that the EU should move more swiftly and decisively on enlargement, especially in the western Balkans. I also took the opportunity to acknowledge the ongoing support and solidarity of our partners in the European Union through the Brexit process.

In concluding my address, I looked to the future, where our guiding principle should be how we can best prepare our Union to continue to meet the needs of its citizens. The European Union is by no means perfect or complete. It is a project that must continue to develop and evolve. Differences will arise between member states, and between the institutions. However, our capacity to work through these issues together makes the EU something to be immensely proud of. We are stronger together, and we achieve most and best when we work together.

While at the Parliament, I had a number of bilateral meetings. I discussed European Union-United Kingdom developments and the protocol with European Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič and thanked him for his work in seeking solutions to issues surrounding the protocol. I met Ruslan Stefanchuk, speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, and reaffirmed to him Ireland's strong solidarity with the people of Ukraine. He expressed his appreciation for the generous response of the Irish people. I also met David McAllister, MEP, Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, and conveyed Ireland's appreciation for the strong support of the European Parliament on Brexit.

Together with President Metsola, I unveiled a bust in the European Parliament to honour the life and career of the late John Hume. It will be a fitting and permanent reminder of John's unwavering commitment to peace on the island of Ireland, and a reflection of his great work achieved in Europe, including as an MEP for 25 years. John had the vision to see the narrative of Ireland's path to peace in the wider narrative of peace in Europe, a peace built on respect for political and cultural diversity cemented with economic interdependence. As we see the return of war to our Continent, it is a vision that must remain an inspiration and guide to us all.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This morning President von der Leyen made a speech to the European Parliament about the energy and cost-of-living crisis affecting people across the continent. She said the energy companies are making revenues they never accounted for or even dreamt of. She is right about that. The Taoiseach can look up the figures for the big oil and gas corporations at a global level. I compared profits year on year, quarter 2 versus quarter 2, and Shell, Exxon, Chevron and BP have all tripled or quadrupled their profits. In this country, energy companies, while announcing record price increases for people, are also announcing record

profits. It is similar with food companies and big corporate landlords.

The answer of the European Commission is a “deep and comprehensive reform of the electricity market”. Is the problem not the fact that it is a market? Should we not recognise that electricity and energy supply should be a public utility in public control, not run for profit but for provision of this essential supply for people and to ensure a rapid and just transition to a zero-carbon economy? I think the majority of people agree with that. That is why tens of thousands of people will be on the streets on 24 September.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I agree with the Taoiseach’s words on John Hume’s vision and with his reflections on the brutal war in Ukraine, from which we are seeing an enormous impact. We have to recall those who come here fleeing other wars. In recent days, I have heard real concerns around a resettlement programme for Syrian refugees fleeing war and Afghan refugees who are here and in many cases seeking family reunification, and the need to speed up the processing of their applications. That is important, alongside the welcome we need to continue to extend to those fleeing the war in Ukraine.

I return to energy and the EU policy thereon. We welcome moves at EU level to introduce a windfall tax on the excessive profits of energy companies. I referred earlier to the Corrib gas field and there is something the Government should do now to address the profits being made there. The revenues from Corrib increased almost fourfold last year, though nothing has happened to increase the cost of production or supply, nor is there any international competition that would boost the price of Corrib generated gas. That price has increased dramatically solely as a result of factors which should have no direct impact on the Irish market. It makes no sense that Corrib gas should be priced as if it was internationally traded and could power German factories in the Rhineland when it is being used here. I propose the Government invoke existing legislative powers for the duration of the emergency on a temporary basis, to ensure Irish-produced gas is sold to the State on a cost-plus basis, bringing down costs for consumers.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I also raise the issue of energy. We know the emergency meeting of EU energy ministers last week in Brussels was to discuss a cap or some way to control energy prices across Europe. That is welcome and needs to happen. It is accepted the challenges may be long term in nature. The Taoiseach referred to that today and we all know that. Much of this comes from the brutal war being inflicted on the people of Ukraine and its outcome across Europe.

We all understand that but the most vulnerable people are being hardest hit, particularly in this country. Many families and businesses are under huge pressure. I have been contacted by many retail businesses, including Centra and SuperValu shops, in my constituency and across the country. The owners run their fridges and try to run their businesses but their costs are going through the roof. Gourmet Parlour, a bakery in Sligo town, was on to me a couple of months ago about the significant increase in the cost of the energy it needs to produce its products. It obviously has ovens and so on along with fridges to store raw materials. All of this has put great pressure on small businesses. As we know, in many parts of the country where there is no foreign direct investment, we rely on small businesses to keep our economy going. Those small businesses are under real pressure and a significant input from the Government is required to put a cap on their energy costs.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Paul Murphy was first. He spoke about President von der Leyen. I agree with her that excessive profits have been made on the back of the war and the crisis

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and that there has been a very substantial increase in revenue. By the end of this month, Europe will have made a decision. We are leading on that. We are working with our European partners. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has been involved. As a country, we have made it very clear that we want a mechanism developed, ideally across Europe, to deal with wind generation companies, which is what largely what we have in Ireland. We have one fossil fuel company, which operates on the Corrib gas field. Any excess revenues raised on the back of the crisis should be used to help the governments of member states, including our own, to support households and to protect jobs. That is the agenda. The gas market is European so it makes sense that this is done across Europe. A deeper reform of the market is also required. A key issue is decoupling gas prices from those of energy generated from wind or other sources such as nuclear. It is not simple. There are many complexities with regard to the markets. We are not going to nationalise the entire European Union market. That is not going to happen. We have to deal with reality. We are not going to do that. We are not in a position to do so. Every member state is entitled to its domestic policies within the European Union framework. I am also not necessarily sure it would lead to the kind of efficiencies the Deputy has suggested. Neither system is perfect, whether a completely market-led approach or a hybrid approach involving State involvement regulated by regulators along with other actors and players in the marketplace. We need a strong regulatory framework with strong capacity. That is what we support.

On Deputy Bacik's point regarding the other resettlement programmes, without question, the Ukrainian situation has put great pressure on our system. Some 50,000 have come into the country, of whom approximately 38,000 or 39,000 are housed by the State through premises that have been procured such as hotels while others have been housed through the housing provided voluntarily by people. There has also been growth in the normal asylum seeking process. There are also programmes for those fleeing war, specifically Afghans and Syrians. I will check on these programmes. I have not been alerted that they are under pressure. There are other newer arrivals, not all of whom are fleeing war. This is also putting pressure on the accommodation situation.

I have already referenced the Corrib gas field, which has been of enormous importance in supplying Ireland. We have not had much success with fossil fuel extraction in Ireland. The Kinsale gas field was the original and the Corrib gas field has been a very important contributor. We import most of our gas. We are very dependent on importation. Again, the EU instrument will cover both. We are supporting that.

I believe that same point covers what Deputy Martin Kenny referenced with regard to the emergency meeting in Brussels. There is to be another meeting and the Commission will publish a proposal with a view to reaching a decision at a meeting of energy ministers on 30 September. Apart from that, the Government will have to help alleviate pressures on people and protect jobs in the weeks immediately ahead of us through the budget and associated cost-of-living package using our own resources and surplus.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Irish Bank Resolution Corporation Commission of Investigation Report: Statements

The Taoiseach: I welcome the opportunity to discuss the report of the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, IBRC, commission of investigation on the Siteserv transaction today.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is there a copy of the speech available?

The Taoiseach: There may not be. I will have to try to secure a copy. I apologise. It is important to debate the contents of this report in the Dáil for two reasons. The first is that the commission was established as a result of issues raised on the floor of the House and its terms of reference were the subject of extensive discussions between all parties in the Oireachtas both at the outset and during the lifetime of the commission. The second is that the commission has made very serious findings, which are of great concern, with regard to the behaviour of some parties during the course of the Siteserv transaction with consequent implications for both our taxpayers and the reputation of Ireland's corporate sector. While we all might share some frustrations at the length and cost of the commission's work, to which I will return, it is important to state at the outset that this has been a worthwhile exercise. What the commission discovered and has reported shines a light on completely unacceptable practices and vindicates the effort that has gone into it. I thank Mr. Justice Brian Cregan, the sole member of the commission, for his comprehensive and detailed report. Before discussing the report, I also want to confirm that while, as Taoiseach, I am responsible for certain administrative functions in relation to the commission, the commission is entirely independent in all respects of its work.

Deputies will recall that the commission was established by the Government in June 2015 following approval of a draft order by both Houses of the Oireachtas. Deputies may also recall that the commission submitted an interim report in November 2015 which raised significant issues regarding legal professional privilege, banking confidentiality and its terms of reference. As a result, following consultations with all Oireachtas parties, bespoke legislation was enacted in 2017 to provide a new legal basis for the commission.

The commission's terms of reference were also amended following consultations between Oireachtas parties. Under these amended terms of reference, the commission was required to investigate all transactions, activities and management decisions at the IBRC, other than those relating solely to the acquisition of assets by the National Asset Management Agency, which occurred between 21 January 2009 and 7 February 2013 and which either resulted in a capital loss to the IBRC of at least €10 million or are specifically identified by the commission as giving rise or likely to give rise to potential public concern in respect of the ultimate returns to the taxpayer. The commission had established that 38 transactions came within these terms of reference and, in its first module, it was charged with investigating the Siteserv transaction, which had been identified by Dáil Éireann as a matter of significant public concern. The commission was also charged with, in the first module of its work, reviewing and reporting on the principles and policies within the IBRC in respect of the setting of interest rates generally during the relevant period.

The commission's terms of reference also extend to investigating: matters relating to the processes, procedures and controls which were operated by the IBRC; whether there is *prima facie* evidence of material deficiencies in the performance of their functions by those acting on behalf of the IBRC, including the IBRC board, directors, management, the staff of the wealth management unit and agents; whether it can be concluded that the transactions were not commercially sound; whether any unusual share trading occurred; and whether the Minister for

Finance or his Department was kept informed, where appropriate, in respect of the transactions concerned and whether he, or officials on his behalf, took appropriate steps in respect of the information provided to them.

My Department received the report on the Siteserv transaction on 29 July and it was published and laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas on 7 September 2022 following consultation with the Attorney General. The commission's report is more than 1,500 pages long, goes through all aspects of the Siteserv transaction in an extraordinary level of detail and makes extensive findings of fact. The Government has noted the findings of the commission with considerable concern. The commission has determined that it can be concluded that the bank made its decision to approve the sale of the Siteserv Group in good faith but based on misleading and incomplete information provided to it by the company.

The commission found there were two parallel processes during the sale process. The first was the "above the surface" sale process organised by Siteserv and its advisers, in which the company chose bidders, evaluated the bids, decided to grant exclusivity to Mr. O'Brien's company's bid and then signed and completed the sale to Mr. O'Brien's company. Second was the so-called "below the surface" process, where certain events occurred in the course of the Siteserv sale process without the knowledge of the bank. This "below the surface" process meant steps were taken and decisions made in the course of the Siteserv sale process in a manner that was clearly and manifestly improper and undermined the integrity of the Siteserv sale process.

The commission has also determined that it can be concluded the Siteserv transaction was, from the perspective of the bank, so tainted by impropriety and wrongdoing that the transaction was not commercially sound. It states that the bank might, subject to certain assumptions, have recovered up to €8.7 million more than the €44.3 million it agreed to accept in the sale. Of course, this is not the only loss to the taxpayer. The very significant costs arising from the commission are also as a result of this impropriety and wrongdoing.

It is also worth putting on the record that some of the allegations made in this House and elsewhere were not upheld by the commission. Many aspects of this transaction, and the behaviour of most parties, including IBRC itself, were appropriate, and this should not be lost in commentary either. The commission found that the procedures and controls that were operated by IBRC at the relevant time in relation to the Siteserv transaction were fit for purpose. The commission found there is no evidence that any unusual trading in Siteserv shares occurred. The commission established the approach taken by the IBRC in relation to the setting of interest rates for individual loans, and how those decisions were reached, and made no adverse findings. I would also like to take the opportunity to place on the record that the commission found there was nothing inappropriate in me, as then Leader of the Opposition, in meeting with Mr. Neil Ryan, then of the Department of Finance, in 2015. It also found Mr. Ryan did not disclose any information gained in the course of his official work to me.

While it is important not to prejudge the outcome of follow-up investigations, people should clearly be held responsible for any breaches of the law. In this regard, the commission recommended the report be brought to the attention of relevant authorities concerning a number of taxation, company law and bankruptcy issues. Accordingly, as per the commission's recommendations and on foot of advice from the Attorney General, I have arranged for the report to be brought to the attention of the Revenue Commissioners, the special liquidators of IBRC, the Corporate Enforcement Authority, the Central Bank and the official assignee in a bankruptcy case. These bodies are now responsible for conducting any appropriate investigations on foot

of the report.

The commission is currently preparing a report with its recommendations on the investigation of the other 37 transactions that fall to be considered as part of its work. It is required to submit this report before the end of October 2022. Upon receipt of this report, the Government will make a decision on the future of the commission. However, the commission has previously indicated there will be significant, if not insuperable, difficulties in progressing the investigation into the other 37 transactions. This is because, for example, many of the companies involved are located outside the jurisdiction of the State or no longer exist as they have been dissolved or gone into receivership. In making that decision, the Government will also be cognisant of the time and cost of the commission to date.

In fact, the length of time this commission has taken to complete the report on the Siteserv transaction raises broader questions about the effectiveness of the commissions of investigation model. When the Commissions of Investigation Act was enacted in 2004, it was hoped it would enable quick and cost-effective investigation of matters of significant public concern. However, it is now more than seven years since the IBRC commission was established. In that time the estimated cost has been around €12 million. This does not include third-party legal costs that have been incurred but not yet paid and which are a matter for the commission to determine. The commission also acknowledged that it involved a substantial degree of uncertainty regarding the amount of costs actually recoverable by the parties before it and assumed its legal costs guidelines are not successfully challenged. The final cost will only be known when the commission makes its determinations on third-party costs. The cost is clearly going to be too high in any case.

In light of the length of time that has elapsed since the commission was established and the level of costs arising, I suggest the Oireachtas might wish to consider whether we can do anything to improve the regulatory framework for statutory investigations. Of course, in saying this we need to tread carefully because commissions must be independent in their investigations and must adhere to fair procedures and natural justice. It must also be borne in mind that some commissions of investigation have been able to complete their investigations in a quicker and more cost-effective manner. However, the broad range of investigations completed to date under the commissions of investigation model might suggest the model is not entirely or equally suitable for all types of investigations. For example, it may be that using this model for investigations into complex corporate transactions is not as suitable as using it for issues related to public administration, where it is possible to confirm facts more easily. There are broader questions about the cost and efficiency of our legal system more generally, which remain a matter of concern to the economy and society. We also need to examine the role and effectiveness of the permanent regulatory and investigatory framework.

The Government is open to ideas from other Oireachtas parties on these issues because, clearly, our ultimate objective is to ensure that, as far as possible, we have a regulatory framework that promotes and ensures a culture of compliance and good ethical standards in matters of both public and corporate affairs. Indeed, pursuit of this objective has been a core value of this Government since coming into office. To date, we have made significant progress with initiatives to combat corruption and white-collar crime. For example, earlier this year we established the Corporate Enforcement Authority, which will have the autonomy and resources to investigate suspected wrongdoing thoroughly. We are increasing staffing levels by nearly 50%, including doubling the number of gardaí, and the authority's budget has also been increased by almost 30%.

An all-of-government implementation plan to progress the recommendations in the Hamilton review into economic crime was published in April 2021. This sets out 22 actions to enhance enforcement and prevention capacity in the criminal justice sphere. Five actions have already been completed in full, and a number of others have been significantly advanced. For example, the Criminal Procedure Bill has been enacted, the Judicial Council has been engaged with in relation to the development of judicial training in respect of complex economic crime or corruption cases, a forum of senior representatives from the relevant operational bodies was established in June 2021, and the Competition (Amendment) Act was signed into law on 29 June. There has also been significant progress to implement other recommendations, including greater powers for investigating agencies to tackle economic crime and corruption; the establishment of an advisory council against economic crime and corruption; reform of the ethics Acts; and additional resourcing for enforcement agencies.

The commission's report has highlighted improper, wrong and unacceptable behaviour on the part of some in the Siteserv transaction. It is right and important the impropriety and wrongdoing in this process has been brought to public attention. It is right and important the relevant statutory bodies will now have the opportunity to investigate this impropriety and wrongdoing and take the action deemed appropriate. This experience raises a question mark for us as a Legislature over what we might do to make any future such investigation more timely and less expensive, but critically, it also demonstrates the need for us to keep refining and improving the regulatory framework, and indeed the culture in corporate and public affairs in our country, to prevent the need for future investigations of this nature in the first place.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis a bheith ábalta labhairt inniu ar an tuairisc seo agus an fiosrúchán atá ag dul ar aghaidh anois le blianta fada ó thaobh an díolachán de Siteserv a tharlaigh in 2012. Tá sé seo ar na bacáin le tamall fada. Caithfidimid díriú isteach agus achoimre a dhéanamh ar cad chuige a raibh an coimisiún bunaithe sa chéad dul síos leis an bhfiosrúchán seo a dhéanamh, anois go bhfuil sé foilsithe sa tseachtain a chuaigh thart.

I welcome the opportunity to speak following the long-awaited publication of the commission of investigation concerning the Siteserv transaction, which took place in 2012. This report has had a long gestation. Before making a number of comments and observations regarding the findings of the commission, it is worth recalling the very reason this commission was established and this investigation was carried out, so long has it been. Back in 2012, households, businesses and the taxpayer were all still reeling from the effects of the financial crash. Many banks were still trying to recover as much money as they could. One such bank was IBRC, formerly Anglo Irish Bank, which was then State-owned following a €34 billion bailout from the taxpayer in 2009. Three years later, in 2012, Siteserv, then a business services company group, was under significant financial strain and owed IBRC, and ultimately the Irish taxpayer, €162.2 million. It was in 2012 that Siteserv was sold at a price of €45.4 million euros to Cathkin Investments Limited, or Millington. Following the sale, Siteserv paid €44.3 million as a final settlement of its debts with IBRC, with IBRC writing off €118 million of the €162 million that had been owed to the bank by Siteserv.

This transaction was of interest to the public and to the taxpayer for a number of reasons. First, it emerged there were other companies, such as Altrad and Anchorage, that had made bids for Siteserv, with claims made that Anchorage had even made a higher bid than Millington but the bid had not been accepted. This led to justifiable concerns regarding whether IBRC could have recouped more money on behalf of the taxpayer and whether Siteserv had been undervalued as a result. This question was of crucial importance. This was not simply a normal com-

mercial transaction but one in which the interests of the taxpayer were involved. This led to further concerns regarding the management of the sales process, whether favourable treatment had been conferred on Millington and its owners, and why higher bids were rejected if they had been made.

Second, it later emerged that, following the transaction, Siteserv shareholders would be paid €5 million. This was highly unusual given that, in the normal course of events when a bank is writing off unpaid obligations, shareholders are never in such a position. This raised further questions regarding the propriety of the transaction and the entire process surrounding it. These questions were reasonable, given the revelations that had emerged, and it was in the public interest that answers be sought. In June 2015, the commission of investigation was established following an order under the Commissions of Investigation Act. The following month, Mr. Justice Brian Cregan was appointed to lead the commission. It should also be noted that, under the legislation, the commission is not only tasked with investigating the Siteserv transaction, but any transactions in which Anglo Irish Bank wrote off €10 million or more. There were 38 such transactions, and a key question following this report into one of these transactions is the future of the commission. I will come to that at the end of my contribution.

I wish to comment on a number of the findings and conclusions made by the commission in the report. The first point to note is that the commission has determined, “It can be concluded that the Bank made its decision to approve the sale of the Siteserv Group to Mr O’Brien in good faith, but based on misleading and incomplete information provided to it by the Company.” The conclusions with respect to the actions of Siteserv are very different, with the commission finding that the decision by Siteserv to offer Millington and its owner exclusivity on the deal was “so tainted by impropriety and ... wrongdoing” that, from the perspective of the bank, the transaction was not commercially sound. In this regard, the commission also found that the manner in which the transaction was conducted, the decisions and actions taken in the course of the transaction, and its outcome were all unreasonable from the perspective of the bank and, therefore, the taxpayer.

The commission further found the decision made by Siteserv to grant exclusivity to Millington and its owner was a decision made “without even considering whether to contact Anchorage, the other leading bidder” before exclusivity was granted to Millington and its owner. Further, the commission found this decision favoured Millington and its owner by conferring a “significant advantage over other bidders in seeking to acquire the Siteserv Group”. As a result, the report found that by failing, or even refusing, to consider the offer that had been made by Anchorage, Siteserv had shut out IBRC from considering the offer. Given the €162 million owed by Siteserv to IBRC at the time, this failure to consider and disclose the Anchorage offer was totally improper.

The commission also found that, throughout the Siteserv sale process, two parallel processes were at play, as the Taoiseach mentioned. One was above the surface, seemingly conducted by the company in plain view. The other was below the surface, in the shadows, carried out without the knowledge of IBRC. The report states, “This “*below the surface*” process meant that steps were taken and decisions made ... in the course of the Siteserv sale process in a manner that was manifestly improper and which undermined the integrity of the Siteserv sale process.”

The report of the commission also made findings with respect to those in Siteserv most intimately involved in the transaction, and I will take a few moments to put some of those findings on the Dáil record. In March 2012, I asked the then Minister for Finance a question, which is

on the Dáil record, about why IBRC had agreed to write down the value of its loans to Siteserv by more than €100 million, while at the same time shareholders of the company were paid €5 million as part of the deal, with a further question posed the following month. It was the first time it was raised in this House. The report we now have reveals that these questions led to a series of communications between the Department of Finance and IBRC, and led to meetings in the upper echelons of IBRC. IBRC then sought information from Siteserv, KPMG and Davy.

In August 2013, I made a freedom of information request for all copies of all Anglo Irish Bank's board papers that had been sent to the Department and the Central Bank in the relevant period. The report finds that IBRC did not furnish the Department with all of the relevant documentation. With respect to the payment that was made to shareholders as part of the Siteserv transaction, the commission has found that the credit committee at IBRC failed to pursue its own request for further information on the €5 million payment and approved the transaction without that information. The report concludes that failure contributed to IBRC recovering up to €2.1 million less from the proceeds of the Siteserv sale, a failure that, ultimately, undermined the interests of the taxpayer.

Mr. Dix was a director of the company and served as chair of Siteserv's sale committee. The report found he played a crucial role in the decision to grant exclusivity to Millington and its owner. The report found the decision conferred significant advantage to Millington above other potential bidders. In addition, the report reached the damning conclusion that "Mr Dix gave false, misleading and untruthful evidence in his sworn affidavits to the Commission" regarding his skiing and fitness bootcamp trip with the owner of Millington, Mr. O'Brien, in St. Moritz, Switzerland. His attendance at this so-called bootcamp with the owner of Millington was not disclosed to the board of Siteserv, its sale subcommittee, its company advisers or the bank. The report further found that this non-disclosure was not accidental but was deliberate. The commission reached the reasonable conclusion that if the relationship between Mr. Dix and the owner of Millington had been known at the time, including the fact they spent a weekend together on a skiing and fitness bootcamp in the Swiss Alps, it would have "given rise to a perception on the part of a reasonable, objective person that Mr Dix was not impartial in his role as chairman of the Sale Sub-Committee".

At the time of the Siteserv-Millington transaction, Mr. Harvey was CEO of the company. The report reaches no less damning conclusions about him. The relevant section of the report in this regard states the commission found that although Mr. Harvey attended a Siteserv board meeting on 4 March 2012 and voted to approve the sale of Siteserv Group to Mr. O'Brien, "he concealed from the Board the fact that he had a significant financial interest in Mr O'Brien's bid succeeding". Those are the words of this report. The report continues, "He also concealed from the Board that Mr McFadden was arranging a plan whereby Mr Harvey would purportedly not have to pay tax on his Siteserv bonus." It later states that those were clearly material interests to be disclosed to the board and yet Mr Harvey failed to do so. These findings are damning and reveal a corporate culture that rode roughshod over the principles of openness.

With respect to Mr. McFadden, who was cofounder of Siteserv, the report makes damning findings that must now be investigated by Revenue as a matter of urgency. These findings are shocking and reveal the disregard which some in high places have for the requirements which ordinary citizens abide by every day. The commission found that Mr. McFadden set out to put forward two scenarios. One scenario is described as a story and the other is described as the reality. These scenarios were to ensure the €350,000 bonus to be paid to Siteserv's CEO would not be declared to Revenue. On the afternoon that IBRC was to clear the sale of Siteserv to Mil-

lington and Siteserv was to approve the sale, Mr. McFadden met with the owner of Millington's adviser beforehand to finalise a plan through which Mr. Harvey and Mr. McFadden would take shareholdings in the company that bought Siteserv. Through a chain of emails, Mr. McFadden set out these two scenarios. Its purpose was to set out the money that would be given to Mr. Harvey from a Siteserv bonus and the proceeds of the Siteserv shares, and the money he would need to repay the €1.7 million debt to the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, IBRC and to buy shares in the company that would acquire Siteserv. The story Mr. McFadden told was that Mr. Harvey would pay income tax and PRSI on his expected bonus. The reality Mr. McFadden described was that Mr. Harvey would waive his bonus, never pay tax on it, and still receive the full amount.

Although the commission found that Mr. Harvey did not waive the bonus, a scheme was established whereby the new company took on the obligation to pay the bonus, which was then bartered for shares in such a way that "no tax was ever paid on this bonus or on this grant of shares", to quote the commission's report. The report goes on to say: "It is clear from the *"story/reality"* document that was sent by Mr McFadden ... that [he] constructed a scheme that was designed, from start to finish, not to disclose Mr Harvey's bonus to the Revenue Commissioners at any time."

The findings of the report are shocking, and lift a veil on the reckless and elitist culture that infected certain echelons of Irish business and high finance during a dark chapter in our State's history, especially when it concerns a bank that the taxpayer had bailed out at huge economic and social cost. It is clear that there were those to whom the ordinary rules that bind ordinary citizens were seen not to apply.

The findings of the report also reveal the sad fact that has bedevilled the State and its citizens for far too long. This is a small place, with a small population, in which those with power and money often swim in the same circles, rub shoulders and even go skiing together in the Swiss Alps. This leaves open the possibility and perception of impropriety or even corruption. I am extremely concerned at the reckless disregard with which highly confidential information passed hands without authorisation before making its way to those who had an interest in accessing it.

We know that the revolving door between the corporate world and the State is one that opens at times when it should in fact be closed. In my opinion, we still do not have robust enough safeguards in place to ensure that individuals do not move freely and with ease between the corridors of corporate Ireland and the corridors of power. It exposes our State to undue risks and casts doubts over the State's ability to act independently on behalf of its citizens.

The report of the commission of investigation on the Siteserv transaction runs into thousands of pages, and Dáil time does not allow for an exhaustive consideration of all of its findings. We have, however, come to the end of a seven-year process, one that will cost more than the €30 million that had been previously anticipated. I am aware that under the commission's remit, there are another 37 transactions with respect to IBRC that could be investigated. We now need to take stock of this process and whether it is fit for purpose, whether it delivers value for money for the taxpayer and whether it acts as an incentive or disincentive for further corporate malpractice.

That reaching findings regarding the propriety or impropriety of a commercial transaction and the actions of those involved should depend on a process that has proved costly and slow

cannot be the model we pursue. Ensuring our corporate enforcement procedures are fit for purpose is essential to ensuring that we can deter malpractice and wrongdoing. It is important that, following this report by the commission of investigation, the Government charts a path forward, one that sees us get to a point a lot more quickly, with less costs involved, but which gets to the truth in a fair and transparent way.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Siteserv report brings us back to the year 2007 and to the calamitous events that unfolded in this country and across the world, events from which we, arguably, have yet to recover. We are still dealing with the fallout. It was in June of that year that Bear Stearns bailed out two of its hedge funds with \$20 billion of exposure to collateralise debt obligations as sub-prime mortgages. At that stage Bear Stearns famously said that the problem was “contained”. As we know, it later had to be bailed out by the Federal Reserve Board. It was in August 2007 that BNP Paribas blocked withdrawals from three of its hedge funds, with a total of \$2.2 billion in assets under management, due to what they termed “a complete evaporation of liquidity”. In September 2007 Northern Rock had to receive support from the Bank of England, which led to investor panic and a bank run, and to Northern Rock’s subsequent nationalisation.

At precisely the same time that Anglo Irish Bank lent €156.4 million, in tranches over just seven months, to Siteserv to refinance its existing borrowings and to provide debt financing for acquisitions, it became the sole lender to Siteserv. Anglo Irish Bank collapsed and Siteserv was seriously overborrowed. In fact, its debts exceeded the value of its business. Meanwhile, Siteserv’s CEO, Mr. Harvey, personally owed Anglo €1.7 million. Its co-founder, Mr. McFadden, who became a Siteserv consultant, was also a significant borrower from Anglo. He was at the receiving end of a €15 million judgment from Anglo in 2009.

Although the specifics of some certain allegations of themselves may not have necessarily stood up, the Cregan report did uncover a series of undisclosed meetings and communications with Mr. O’Brien’s company Island Capital in relation to “management incentivisation arrangements” for Mr. Harvey and Mr. McFadden. This was despite the fact that Island Capital and Siteserv had entered into a confidentiality agreement under which Island Capital had agreed not to contact any Siteserv officers or employees without prior consent.

The report also discloses that Mr. Robert Dix, a Siteserv non-executive director and its senior independent director, at a crucial stage in the Siteserv sale process when second round bids were due to be submitted, travelled to St. Moritz - as we know - with Mr. McFadden to spend a week with Mr. Denis O’Brien and Mr. McFadden on a skiing holiday. On this holiday Mr. McFadden and Mr. O’Brien discussed the amount of shares that Mr. McFadden and Mr. Harvey could acquire in Mr. O’Brien’s new company if Mr. O’Brien’s bid was successful, and they agreed a figure of 15%. As we know, Mr. Harvey later voted in favour of the grant of exclusivity to Mr. O’Brien in his capacity as a Siteserv director without disclosing his agreement in principle to acquire a shareholding in the new company and thus that he had a significant financial interest in Mr. O’Brien’s bid succeeding.

Mr. Dix chaired the Siteserv sale sub-committee meeting assessing all the bids, without ever disclosing his holiday with the successful bidder to either the committee or the board. The report arrives at a judgment that one can reasonably disagree with. On the one hand, it concludes that Mr. Dix’s relationship with Mr. O’Brien, his friendship with Mr. McFadden and his holiday with them both, “would, if known at the time, have given rise to a perception on the part of a reasonable, objective person that Mr Dix was not impartial in his role as chairman of the Sale Sub-Committee”.

On the other hand, the report states that Mr. O'Brien was not at fault in going on this holiday with Mr. Dix and Mr. McFadden, or in relation to any of the other improprieties uncovered. It is perhaps a testament to Mr. O'Brien's ethical and moral standing that he can continue to behave seemingly entirely without fault even while all around him, for some strange reason, his associates and colleagues are behaving quite improperly.

Judge Cregan found that not only did Mr. Dix's behaviour give rise to a perception of a lack of impartiality but that Mr. Dix "did not act in an impartial manner in his role as Chairman of the Sale Sub-Committee, but instead acted in a manner that improperly favoured Mr. O'Brien's bid". In particular, he found that Siteserv's decision after two rounds of bids to grant exclusivity to Mr. O'Brien was, from the perspective of the bank, not reasonable and was tainted by impropriety. It is worthwhile listing why. Mr. Dix did not disclose to Siteserv or its advisers or the bank his relationship with Mr. O'Brien; his relationship with Mr. McFadden; Mr. McFadden's role in advising-assisting Mr. O'Brien in relation to his bid; that Mr. McFadden would benefit financially if Mr. O'Brien's bid were successful; and his holiday with Mr. O'Brien and Mr. McFadden at a key time in the transaction. The decision to grant exclusivity to Mr. O'Brien was, coincidentally, made just four days after Mr. Dix had returned from his holiday with Mr. O'Brien and Mr. McFadden.

5 o'clock

That decision was one of the most important made in the course of the Siteserv transaction.

As chairman of the sale subcommittee and as director with primary responsibility for execution of the Siteserv transaction, Mr. Dix played a vital role in the decision to grant exclusivity to Mr. O'Brien. The exclusivity decision favoured Mr. O'Brien as it conferred on him a significant advantage over other bidders. Mr. Dix thus acted in a manner that favoured Mr. O'Brien, and did so while not disclosing any of these matters.

Meanwhile, Mr. Harvey concealed from Siteserv, its advisers and the bank that he had a significant financial interest in Mr. O'Brien's bid. Mr. Harvey also concealed from them the fact he had passed on confidential information about the sale process. Mr. Harvey did not disclose to them that Mr. McFadden had a role in advising and assisting Mr. O'Brien in his bid, nor did he disclose to them that Mr. McFadden would also obtain shares in Mr. O'Brien's new company if Mr. O'Brien's bid were successful.

However, above and beyond the ins and outs of this striking narrative, the stark fact is it involves large sums of money that are nonetheless dwarfed by the cost of the commission itself. Under the Commissions of Investigation Act, none of the oral evidence gathered by Mr. Justice Cregan is admissible in any civil or criminal court proceedings. The *quid pro quo* is that the judge can arrive at the truth effectively and expeditiously. Clearly, this has not happened. Instead, reading the report is like examining a long-buried time capsule that includes a story from long ago.

These investigations do not serve a useful purpose if they cannot be completed in a reasonable time frame and as expeditiously as possible. There can certainly be no question of any further modules along these lines. There are doubts whether any further modules on these lines can occur and they cannot take place unless and until we know what went wrong in the management of this commission. Was it the legislation, the terms of reference, or some other factor? We need to learn from our mistakes instead of repeating them. We need to figure out

how we can undertake examinations of issues of public importance in a much more timely and expeditious way. Clearly, the system we have is not serving the public interest given how long this inquiry took. There are other modules on the agenda.

Let us recall how an attempt was made to try to empower the Houses of the Oireachtas to carry out certain kinds of inquiries almost ten years ago and the decision was taken by the people. Should we, as part of the Oireachtas, consider better ways of examining matters of public interest than the legislation, the 2004 Act, that was used for this? It is something this House and the committees could usefully examine.

An Ceann Comhairle: We now go to the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Calleary. It is his first time to speak since he reassumed office. We congratulate the Minister of State on his appointment.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Dara Calleary): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank you for your good wishes.

The findings of the commission of inquiry shine a light on very unacceptable practices by certain parties during the course of the Siteserv transaction. The commission's report reminds us we must be ever vigilant in ensuring our laws are upheld. One purpose of company law is to facilitate entrepreneurial activity. It does so by providing for separate corporate legal personality and limited liability, thereby limiting personal exposure to financial risk. In return for these privileges, and privileges they are, company law sets down a framework within which companies and their directors are expected to operate. Certain reporting and transparency requirements must be complied with; certain protections are afforded to shareholders, creditors and the wider public; and sanctions, civil and criminal, are provided for in respect of certain non-compliance.

The law demands that in return for the privilege of limited liability, those availing of it act in good faith and abide by minimum requirements of governance, transparency and commercial probity. Companies are governed and managed by individuals. Most company directors want to do, and indeed do, the right thing. They act in accordance with the law. In the event of non-compliance, investigation and enforcement and individual accountability are important.

As I have recently assumed office as Minister of State with responsibility for company regulation, I want to reiterate that the unacceptable practices by certain parties as described in this report are very concerning. I welcome the commission's recommendations, especially those which prompt further consideration by public bodies with enforcement functions including, the Corporate Enforcement Authority, CEA, which falls under my responsibility. The commission recommends that the CEA should investigate the matters set out in chapter 17 of the report relating to shareholdings. There is also a recommendation that the CEA and the Revenue Commissioners investigate matters set out in part 1 of chapter 26 relating to a €780,000 loan scheme.

Officials from my Department have already sent the CEA the commission's report. Deputies will appreciate that, by law, the CEA is independent in its functions, but I have no doubt whatever the CEA will very carefully consider the report and its findings and assess what further actions may be appropriate for the authority to pursue. While there are no findings or recommendations arising in respect of my Department, officials in my Department will also consider the report in the context of any possible wider implications for company law.

It has long been justifiably argued that Ireland must maintain a conducive environment for

enterprise to develop and grow, leading to increased levels and quality of jobs, which in turn provide for higher standards of living. A vital component of a conducive environment is business regulation.

My Department is responsible for a range of independent bodies that have important roles in respect of business oversight, supervision, regulation, protection and enforcement. Such bodies include the Corporate Enforcement Authority, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority, and the Companies Registration Office, under which are the Registry of Friendly Societies and the Registrar of Beneficial Ownership. These bodies, along with others, provide the framework on which businesses operate and can rely upon to ensure there are clear rules for business that protect all in the value chain, from consumers to suppliers, that there are registration and governance requirements that provide transparency for stakeholders, including investors, and so on.

A key focus of my new role will be to support a strengthening of the regulatory bodies under my remit, especially those commonly regarded as watchdogs, in light of the growing economy and the additional functions ascribed to them over the past two years. First and most important in respect of the matter we are debating, the recent establishment of the new Corporate Enforcement Authority is intended to ensure consumers and businesses have confidence that alleged breaches of company law will be effectively investigated and prosecuted. A well-resourced authority with effective enforcement tools at its disposal will meet the challenges it faces in its investigation and prosecution of alleged breaches of company law. The total increase in the overall headcount for the new CEA will be nearly 50% over previous levels, and the number of Garda assigned to the CEA is doubling. The authority is equipped with significant enforcement powers, including prosecuting detected breaches of the Companies Act 2014 and referring cases to the Director of Public Prosecutions for prosecution on indictment. I believe company law should always be responsive to new developments. My Department will continue to work with the new authority to ensure it has the appropriate legislative tools necessary to enhance Ireland's company law framework and to undertake modern, complex corporate law enforcement

I want to recount the broader reforms the Government has made and those planned, all of which have at their heart a rebalancing of the rights and obligations of companies and their stakeholders. We took into account the distinctive challenges facing our small companies by introducing a dedicated rescue process for small and micro companies, the small company administrative rescue process, SCARP, which came into effect in December 2021. We have also reformed our examinership laws under the European Union regulations to help bring about a pan-EU regime for helping companies in difficulty while ensuring their creditors have rights. The Sale of Tickets (Cultural, Entertainment, Recreational and Sporting Events) Act 2021 also reflects our reform philosophy in striking a new balance for consumers. The Competition (Amendment) Act earlier this year enables the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to crackdown on rogue operators. Cartels where they exist will be broken up and companies abusing a dominant position will be punished with heavy fines of up to 10% of global turnover.

I am determined that the ambitious agenda of reform to strengthen our enterprise regulatory enforcement bodies undertaken by my predecessor, Deputy Robert Troy, will continue. I wish to acknowledge the great work that he put in in this area. I will shortly bring to the Seanad the Consumer Rights Bill which represents the biggest overhaul of consumer rights in nearly 40 years. This new law is good for consumers and good for business. Most businesses are responsible and treat their customers fairly when things go wrong. For those that do not, it can give

them an unfair advantage over their competitors. This new law consolidates legislation and updates it to make it fit for the modern digital age. Within the next few months, I will also publish new laws to permit for the first time a third party to represent a group of harmed consumers. This is an important development to improve consumers' access to justice.

I will shortly introduce legislation to enhance and reform the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, providing it with new functions and improving the legislation to make the PIAB process more effective. Officials in my Department are developing new legislation to reform our limited partnership laws as well as business name laws. I expect to bring to Government shortly a general scheme of a Bill to reform laws on co-operative societies and encourage their development. All this work is designed to ensure our body of legislation is fit for purpose in the 21st century and our regulatory bodies are equipped to undertake their important statutory functions.

The report we are debating today goes through all aspects of the Siteserv transaction in an extraordinary level of detail and makes extensive findings of fact. Government accepts the findings of the commission. It is clear that there were unacceptable practices by certain parties during the course of that transaction. As the Taoiseach said, he is bringing the relevant recommendations of the commission to the attention of the relevant authorities as appropriate. I have no doubt that these bodies will carefully consider the report and in line with their statutory role take the appropriate action where considered necessary.

Despite the unacceptable behaviour of a minority, the vast majority of businesses in Ireland do not engage in such practices. We have a valuable reputation as a good place to do business overseen by effective laws and regulatory bodies. This has been hard won and must be maintained. White-collar crime damages our economy, breeds cynicism in our society and is a threat to our domestic and our international reputation. It cannot and will not be tolerated.

As the new Minister of State with responsibility for trade promotion, digital and company regulation I will work to continue to ensure that the framework on which businesses operate is built on clear rules for business which provide transparency and protection for stakeholders, employees and consumers.

I acknowledge that a number of Deputies and their staff were involved in this process from the start and took considerable personal courage to pursue the issues.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I take the opportunity to congratulate the Minister of State on his promotion.

I welcome some of what he has said on the Corporate Enforcement Authority. If ever there was a place that needed such an entity to be fit for purpose it is obviously this State. Unfortunately, as we get a lesson about 2012, it is a further reminder of the perception of the connectivity certain people have. There are relationships that exist. People have trips and holidays together and have conversations, meaning that at times things can be arranged no matter what the paperwork actually shows at the end.

Anyway, we are dealing with the Siteserv transaction. People have spoken about unacceptable behaviour tainted by impropriety. That is the biggest issue. I do not know what term to use. The Minister of State spoke about underplaying. It goes without saying that it is absolutely underplaying given the circumstances we are dealing with.

A number of Deputies have gone through the ins and outs of this. Siteserv was founded in 2004 by Mr. Harvey and Mr. McFadden. By 2008, it owed Anglo Irish Bank €155 million. We know the whole sordid history relating to Anglo Irish Bank and the bailout of approximately €36.4 billion. We know that in 2008 Mr. McFadden had borrowings of €7 billion with the bank and had signed personal guarantees up to €74 million. He seemed to be on the road to bankruptcy. We know there was a very close relationship between Mr. McFadden and Mr. Harvey. We now know of the relationship with Mr. O'Brien. We know of Mr. Robert Dix's involvement with this. It is fair to say they all knew each other very well and that seemed to work out reasonably well for people.

People probably find it difficult to understand given the relationship and the money owed that Mr. McFadden was on contract with Siteserv to find buyers, arrange for sales and all the rest of it. Some of this report makes for very interesting reading and we know that whatever happened from September 2011 until the close of this deal, the fact is that there was an enormous write-off of €118 million of the money owed by Siteserv to IBRC, which had previously been Anglo Irish Bank. The sale went through to, I believe, Millington for €444.3 million. This whole thing was started on the basis of another company stating it would have paid more and all the rest of it.

I agree with some of the previous speakers who said that at this point in time or at least when the commission prepared this report, we did not have the wherewithal to deal with the whole issue of corporate enforcement. I would love to see the relevant authorities in place and taking action. If we have anomalies or missing parts, be they legislative or whatever else, we need to make it happen. We know the pain people went through at the time of the economic collapse, which is again on our minds with what we are facing now. We need to ensure that we have the wherewithal to deal with all this.

We are dealing with the issue of financial impropriety in the case of Siteserv. We are talking about a time when people were going through austerity. As the Minister of State is in front of me, I wish to speak about a company that is suffering real difficulties. I refer to Suretank in Dunleer. A representative of that company spoke on LFM radio of this morning. I spoke to Martin Winters myself. There were other businesses such as McGeough's, Rocksalt in Dundalk and also Anglo Printers in Drogheda. I would like a bit of leeway to read out a couple of lines:

We have been informed our electricity bill which was €15,000 will increase to €50,500 with effect from October 1st 2022. We have also been informed our gas bill which was €3,200 per month will increase to €18,000 per month also with effect from October 1st 2022.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is wandering.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I know that. We really need business supports. As much as we need to deal with those who have acted wrongly, which is an absolute understatement, we need to look after businesses that are under severe pressure at this point in time. I understand there is an international and domestic part to this, but we really need to make sure we can deliver.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I wish the Minister of State, Deputy Calleary, well in his new and very important role.

As we know, the IBRC had been created to wind down Anglo Irish Bank and the Irish Nationwide Building Society, which had been nationalised and the citizens acquired a huge debt of approximately €35 billion. In 2012, the troika was still in town; the austerity programme was

under way; the national debt had ballooned; new taxes such as the universal social charge, USC, were introduced; some people lost their homes and businesses and there was a lot of fear and distress. IBRC had allowed Siteserv to sell itself and it was assisted by Davy and KPMG. Mr. Robert Dix, who was a non-executive member of the company, was appointed as chairperson of the Siteserv sales committee. As chairman of the sales committee, he was described as a key decision maker, yet he travelled to Switzerland with Mr. McFadden to spend a week with Mr. O'Brien on a fitness holiday which was described as a boot camp. The attendance at the boot camp just four days before Mr. O'Brien's company was given exclusivity, was not disclosed to the Siteserv board. This was judged to be deliberate by the commission, which stated Mr. Dix gave untruthful evidence to the commission. It went on to say he was not impartial in his role as chairman of the sales sub-committee. Exclusivity, according to the commission, favoured Mr. O'Brien in the bidding process. The commission deemed this to be one of the most important decisions in the course of the Siteserv transaction and it conferred a significant advantage on Mr. O'Brien. Despite the fact that Mr. O'Brien's company's second round bid was reduced by €3 million, the reduction was not disclosed to the IBRC, which seems extraordinary. This non-disclosure was deemed to be deliberate and the decision to do this was made by Mr. Dix. The commission found that Mr. Harvey, the CEO of Siteserv, concealed significant financial interest in the O'Brien bid from the board. He also concealed from the board the fact that he had passed confidential information about the Siteserv sales process to Mr. McFadden, who in turn passed it on to Mr. O'Brien's adviser. The CEO and some of the directors of Siteserv were aware of Mr. McFadden's role in relation to the entry of Mr. O'Brien into the Siteserv sale process. The report states:

These undisclosed negotiations led to the extraordinary situation in which Mr. Harvey, as CEO of a Plc, and Mr. McFadden (the two co-founders of, and major shareholders in, the Company) negotiated a 15% shareholding in Mr. O'Brien's new company without anyone in the Company or the Bank being aware of it – even though the process was monitored by the Board of Directors of Siteserv, the Sale Sub-Committee, two sets of corporate finance advisers (KPMG and Davy), the Chief Financial Officer...the Company's solicitor (Arthur Cox), a representative of IBRC [and] the Bank.

It really looks like they ran rings around them. One wonders why questions were not being asked when that transaction was being discussed. Even more incredibly, the bank agreed to receive a fixed amount of €44.3 million in full repayment of the Siteserv debt. This allowed surplus cash to be paid as bonuses to directors of the company rather than a further reduction of Siteserv's huge indebtedness to the bank. It would be obscene for those who manipulated the sales process to the point where the commission described it as "not commercially sound" to retain those bonuses. The bank must demand the return of the bonuses. The leaking of a key confidential document by a person in Davy who was running the process, and who is now a very senior official in the Department of Finance, cannot be ignored. Was that known or declared in advance of his move to the Department? We need to hear from the Minister on the issue and what action he proposes to take.

I note Mr. Dix, who is so prominent in this report, who withheld a letter with a lower offer from Mr O'Brien, after he was awarded exclusivity, is a director of one of the companies the Government is currently doing very lucrative deals with for long leases of social housing. We cannot see the same people emerging all of the time, even at this point. The payment to shareholders in the context of such large write-downs was beyond controversial and the payment could have been reduced had IBRC asked Davy for an updated analysis on the performance of

Siteserv. That resulted in a direct loss to IBRC and, by extension, the State.

The year 2012 was when Siteserv, together with its subsidiaries such as Sierra - later to become GMC Sierra - was bought. I refer to GMC Sierra because it started preparing to bid for contracts to install water meters, with the company hiring water meter specialists in mid-2011. People had accepted so much following the crash, it was only after water charges were introduced that they started to take to the streets in significant numbers. Having taken part in most of these protest marches myself and talked to people along the way, it was clear this was about more than water charges: it was a breaking point. There was a feeling that all the pain was being felt by ordinary people, while another cohort of people were gaining from their misery. So much for us all being in this together. I began looking into this and it led me to Siteserv and its subsidiary, GMC Sierra, one of three companies appointed to manage the installation of water meters across six regions. I make no apology for constantly banging that drum by all the means available to me and doing my best to make sense of all the material that was coming my way. I believe that at all times I acted in the public interest. While all of the information I received did not prove to be correct, I believe it was given to me in good faith.

In April 2015 I received a heavily redacted response to a freedom of information, FOI, request. This response escalated the issue. Here is a flavour of what it contained. It stated: “The Minister is very concerned with how a large number of transactions have been handled over the past number of months and this has led the Department to question the effectiveness of the CEO and the current Management Team.” It included quite a bit about Siteserv. What was the basis for the Department coming to those conclusions? Were there further complaints to the Department like the one that some of the bidders made to it about Siteserv? If the Cregan commission is wound up, we need to hear from the Minister and the Department about what was the basis of it, because there are lessons to be learned. There should be a sharing of information between Departments in that regard.

Ms Ann Nolan from the Department of Finance gave the following evidence to the inquiry:

The relationship with the Bank was unquestionably more strained than the relationship with the other banks in which the State had invested despite the fact that there was no material difference between how the relationship with the Bank was managed by the Dept. vis-à-vis the other banking investments of the State (AIB, Bank of Ireland and Irish Life & Permanent)...The only rationale I can offer is that the Bank resented being accountable to its sole shareholder, confused independence with lack of accountability...[The report goes on.]

During the time I was raising issues around the transaction I talked to a lot of people and business culture in this country was repeatedly raised with me. I had no doubt there was an aching desire by many business people for wrongdoing to be exposed and dealt with appropriately. People wanted a business culture that was fair. They told me that they did not mind fair competition but they wanted an honest process, and they wanted to be assured that was the case. It is depressing to read the view of Anchorage, the other second-round bidder for Siteserv, which had increased its final round bid. It said that the sales process was not conducted in a neutral fashion. It is clear from the report that it was more than keen to acquire Siteserv and perhaps to further invest in Ireland. It believed the process was “rigged” and described Ireland as a “banana republic”. Anchorage was not the only bidder with concerns.

The Commissions of Investigation Act was an attempt to provide for inquiries that would substantially reduce the legal costs. Mr. Justice Cregan insisted that there was a need for leg-

islation to enhance his powers, and bespoke legislation was passed by us in this Oireachtas to provide for that. This had the effect of turning this inquiry into a tribunal, but behind closed doors, with 42 individuals or organisations gaining legal representation at the inquiry, as of 2019. Indeed, the Taoiseach did suggest that different types of inquiries may be needed for different types of wrongdoing but we really need to catch this in real time without getting to that in the first instance. Where inquiries have to be held in retrospect, it is essential that they are independent, timely and cost-effective. We in the Social Democrats looked elsewhere for solutions and believe an independent, anti-corruption agency with strong powers, including the power of arrest, is required. When researching this, the example we used was the model we found in Queensland in Australia but that is not the only model we can look at. We need to look outside this jurisdiction at how other countries do things to find good examples of models we can introduce here.

This is a very sizeable document. I nearly went blind reading it in the last week. I hope that when the commission finally reports in relation to the other transaction we will have the opportunity to have another debate on how we will deal with these issues into the future.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome today's debate on the IBRC Commission of Investigation report. It is a 1,500 page report but I am not going to pretend I have read it. I know others have done so but I certainly have not read it. I have read summary reports of it and it has been well documented in recent days. It goes into great detail on the Siteserv transaction, making extensive findings of fact. The Government accepts the findings of the commission and believes the report shines a light on unacceptable practices by certain parties during the course of the transaction. Amongst its findings, the commission determined that the IBRC made its decision to approve the sale of the Siteserv group in good faith but based on misleading and incomplete information provided to it by the Siteserv company itself. It also found that there was a "below the surface" process whereby certain events occurred in the course of the Siteserv sale process without the knowledge of the bank. This "below the surface" process meant that steps were taken and decisions made in the course of the Siteserv sale process in a manner that was manifestly improper and which undermined the integrity of the overall sale process. The commission also determined that it can be concluded that the Siteserv transaction was, from the perspective of the bank, so tainted by impropriety and wrongdoing that the transaction was not commercially sound. It concluded that the bank could have recovered up to €8.7 million more than the €44.3 million it agreed to accept in the sale.

Just before Deputy Calleary leaves the Chamber I want to join others in congratulating him. I am delighted to see him on the front benches of the House again, deservedly serving as a Minister for State. It is a proud day for his family and for County Mayo.

I will now make a few more general points about this commission of investigation. Tribunals of investigation are hugely important in terms of providing transparency, identifying corruption where it has happened and uncovering how it has manifested itself but the length of time it has taken for this report to be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas is absolutely astounding. The inquiry was set up ten years ago. I read in an article in January of this year that €80 million was spent on three tribunals over the past decade. I am sure there have been more but the three in question are the IBRC investigation, the Moriarty Tribunal which ran for an incredibly long time and investigation into the NAMA Project Eagle loan book sale. Those three investigations together had a cumulative cost of €80 million. They carried out very important work but the expenditure on that work needs to be scrutinised, as does the length of time it takes to report back. The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, which deals with

an inordinate amount of criminal law cases each year operates on a very small budget. It does not have a hugely resourced department behind it but it is able to get cases through the courts system at all levels every day of the week. It concerns me that, while we are right as a body politic to extract the truth and deliver transparency on behalf of the taxpayers and citizens of our land, it takes an inordinate amount of time for these tribunals, inquiries and investigations to conclude their work.

All of these tribunals have, I hope, cleaned up the body politic in terms of how the State, big business, banks and everyone does their business. One of the upshots of all of this is that there is an incredible level of scrutiny of politicians and we put ourselves forward for all of that. However, I would like to home in on an issue that some Deputies, Senators and councillors would have mentioned to Government figures in the past, which is the idea of politically exposed personnel. Any Member of this House, any Member of Seanad Éireann or any member of a local authority is considered to be politically exposed from a banking and financial point of view. We all know what that means in this House but for the record, it means that in the eyes of our banking system, there is a potential conflict of interest in terms of holding public office with an elected mandate and transacting with one's local financial institution, be it a bank, credit union or whatever. However, it is not just applied to the individual who has chosen the elected way of life and who has a mandate from the people. The politically exposed categorisation extends to family members to such an extent that if the 19 or 20 year old son or daughter of a Member of this House and or of a local councillor tries to raise a loan to go to college or to buy their first car, a clapped-out Ford Fiesta, he or she is deemed to be politically exposed and it can take eight months to get the loan processed. It is wrong. There have been people who have come through this House and abused their position. Some of them have been found out and have been all over our national press and some of them have not been found out. However, most people, and I say this with respect to people of all colours and creeds, who have been elected and who have come through the doors of the Chamber to stand up for their communities, counties and constituencies do it for the very best reasons, not for corruption and not for ill-gotten gains. The idea of being politically exposed is wrong. The political exposure, the transparency here is being recorded, being all over the press, having a record of everything we say and do. We have the offices of SIPO just down the street. This is where the accountability lies but I cannot fathom why the son, daughter, niece or nephew of a county councillor in west Clare, Roscommon, Mayo or Dublin is considered to be politically exposed and cannot go off and raise a simple, basic loan at the start of the 2022-23 academic year. It is wrong. It is bonkers.

This did not come in under this Government or the previous one. I think it came in about nine or ten years ago. It was a major reaction to tribunals, corruption and people abusing their positions but somebody should scream that this is madness and stop it, or at least row back on it a bit. Certainly, we need accountability and I am sure there is more we need to do in that regard. Maybe the fobbing in system needs to be looked at. Maybe there is lots of stuff we need to do here. I heard the Ceann Comhairle on the radio yesterday speaking about how Parliament can improve but good Lord, one would want to be living like an altar boy, leading a life of absolute purity with white smoke coming from the chimney of one's house to have any chance of sitting in a seat here and representing one's constituency. Someone needs to look at the politically exposed issue. By all means, put us under the lens but not our sons, daughters, in-laws, nieces and nephews. I have not even told my in-laws that they are politically exposed but the bank will tell them when they go down and that is wrong. That is absolutely wrong. Someone needs to stop the madness.

An Ceann Comhairle: My own 25 year old daughter was refused the opportunity to buy a savings product with a reputable savings agency because she was considered to be politically exposed. One can imagine how an adult child feels about his or her parent when that sort of thing happens.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The example the Ceann Comhairle has given is perfect. Seven or eight months before I was elected to this House, when I was a teacher and a county councillor, I went down to the INTO credit union, of which most teachers are a member, to raise a loan to improve the family car. I could not get one, despite having a good income. I have no qualms about saying that I had two incomes. I worked damned hard but I had to go to the bank of mom and dad in my late thirties to get a car and set up a standing order to pay mom and dad back. It is bonkers. It is absolutely bonkers. Shame on the people who took backhanders in this House previously, for political gain or for other reasons but most people who come through this House come in here for good reasons. We really need to look at this issue. I am sorry I digressed a bit but it is a point that should have been made a long time ago. It is often mentioned over coffee breaks but never really gets mentioned in the Chamber.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, both of us got a bit carried away there, I suppose, but not without some good reason. Deputy Patricia Ryan is next with the view from Monasterevin.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: Where does one go after that?

I welcome the publication of the report and commend Mr. Justice Cregan and his team on their diligence. The report runs to more than 1,500 pages as everybody here is aware. As I have only a short amount of time I will focus on the issues that stood out for me. The report of the commission of investigation into the IBRC sale of Siteserv to Millington for €45 million showed that as part of that deal, IBRC, which succeeded Anglo Irish Bank, wrote off €119 million worth of Siteserv's €150 million debt. It is clear from reading the report that the integrity of the Siteserv sales process was compromised from the very start. The phrase, "tainted by impropriety", is mentioned on more than 40 separate occasions within this report.

The detail in the report leaves the reader in no doubt that certain individuals manipulated the process for their own self-interest. These individuals concealed information and behaved in a manner described in the report as "manifestly improper and wrong". The report also stated the Siteserv transaction was not commercially sound in the manner in which it was conducted, the decisions made and the outcomes achieved. There are a number of examples of undisclosed conflicts of interest, something to which we have become accustomed with regard to other matters that will be discussed in this House tomorrow.

The report found that in March 2012, the Siteserv board proved in principle the sale of the group. It said Siteserv CEO, Mr. Brian Harvey, attended this meeting and voted to approve the sale. He concealed from the board the fact that he had a significant financial interest in this particular bid succeeding. Mr. Harvey also concealed from the board that Siteserv co-founder, Mr. Niall McFadden, was arranging a plan to avoid Mr. Harvey paying tax on his bonus. The report found Mr. Harvey did not pay tax on his €350,000 bonus or on the receipt of shares in the new company and that Mr. McFadden paid no tax on the almost €500,000 finder's fee paid to him in shares by Mr. O'Brien.

It also found that there was a below-the-surface process where certain events occurred in the course of the sale process without the knowledge of the bank. This below-the-surface pro-

cess meant steps were taken and decisions made in the course of the sale process in a manner that was manifestly improper and which undermined the integrity of the Siteserv sale process. Bonuses of more than €800,000 to Siteserv directors on completion of the sale were “lavish ... and entirely unacceptable for a Company that was costing the taxpayer almost €118 million in loan write-offs and losses”. Yet again, the taxpayer is on the hook, given the IBRC could have recovered up to €8.7 million more than it agreed to accept in settlement of Siteserv’s debt.

Urgent reform is needed with regard to how inquiries like this debt are dealt with. The commission took seven years to publish its report; clear evidence that we need a much more efficient way of getting to the bottom of matters such as those dealt with in this report. Seven years is far too long. The current system is broken and absolutely needs urgent attention.

Yesterday, I spoke to a struggling business owner who received a sheriff’s warrant letter for an unpaid tax bill of almost €2,500. Added to that bill was almost €400 in interest, €72 in bailiff’s costs and €160 in sheriff’s poundage, bringing the bill to just over €3,000. Small business owners are struggling but as long as the vested interests are seen to, the Government seems to look the other way. That is my opinion anyway. Ireland is a great little country to do business in but only if you are part of the old boys club network. As the saying goes, if I owe you €1,000, that is my problem, but if I owe you €1 million, that is your problem. Sinn Féin in government will change this and we certainly will. We will turn the tide away from those vested interests in favour of ordinary workers and small business owners and their families. This has to stop.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I will start unusually by quoting a tweet from the renowned Mr. Vincent Browne:

Isn’t it unfortunate for Denis O’Brien that so many of his involvements result in controversy: the award of the Irish mobile phone licence; INM; Digicel; Beacon hospital over vaccines; and now Siteserve. Perhaps it has all to do just with poor communications.

We have to look at the bare facts of this report, however. They are pretty astonishing, as is the fact that it seems the commission will not investigate the other 37 transactions in which the State-owned IBRC wrote off €1.88 billion in aggregate between 2009 and 2013, the special liquidation.

There is no ambiguity in the case of Siteserv, however. The heavily-indebted company debt manoeuvred the State via the IBRC to not only write off €118 million of a €162 million debt it had accumulated but it manoeuvred the sale of Siteserv to benefit its own shareholders and directors. It did this by giving one bidder, Mr. Denis O’Brien, preferential and exclusive status in the bidding, not because it was the best offer for the company or, indeed, for the State, but because it was the best offer for them and their own self-interest. Members should remember this was a company near collapse and likely to be unable to repay its loans. Despite the 1,500-page length this report, it is careful to state that Mr. O’Brien was not guilty of any misdoing, nor it seems was the IBRC. It just appears again, as so often has done in the history of this State, that Mr. O’Brien was unfortunate - it was a series of unfortunate events for him, which, oddly, yet again, while unfortunate, seems to have left him with an even larger fortune.

Mr. O’Brien’s adventures in his interactions with this State would make a wonderful and entertaining movie; one in which our hero, despite the odds, always seems to come out on top. This recent farrago must be set beside the good fortune, which sees another associated company doing very well from the national broadband contract. Indeed, few here will have forgotten that

while the water charges campaign delivered a major blow to the Fine Gael and Labour Party Government in its plan to charge for water and, undoubtedly, eventually privatise it, the national turmoil did at least provide a lot of contracts for Mr. O'Brien's companies in attempting to install meters on ordinary people's properties.

This report is fascinating and chapter 8, which is entitled *The Trip to Bootcamp and the Role of Mr. Dix*, is worth a read. I urge everybody to read it; it is immensely entertaining. I will read a portion of it for the record:

On Saturday, 28 January 2012, the Chairman of the Sale Sub-Committee, Mr Robert Dix, ... travelled to St Moritz in Switzerland with Mr Denis O'Brien and Mr Niall McFadden to spend a week on a skiing and fitness holiday, which they called "*bootcamp*". This was at a crucial stage in the Siteserv sale process, when second round bids were due to be submitted.

Mr. McFadden, we are told was "a highly experienced and sophisticated corporate financier". The chapter continues:

Mr McFadden had, over the years, organised a number of bootcamps ... [and he] and Mr O'Brien had attended at least three such bootcamps together in Kenya and in Crete. ... On both of these occasions [they] had flown home on Mr O'Brien's private jet. ... If Mr O'Brien's bid were successful, Mr McFadden hoped to get a finder's fee from Mr O'Brien for his introduction. ... [A]pparently, the exercise regime was [extremely] arduous ... participants rose at about 6.30 am to do an early morning run before breakfast and [after breakfast all of them] went out cross-country skiing.

The chapter continues by noting that keen to go to dinner to another restaurant in the local village:

Mr Dix and Mr McFadden went to their rooms to change before ... dinner. Whilst in his room, Mr Dix participated in an important telephone conference call at approximately [six o'clock] with the Company's corporate finance advisers (i.e. KPMG and Davy) during which he was updated on the second round bids.

This is a glimpse into the world of the other Ireland hidden from most people; an Ireland of corporate dealing facilitated by the State and made possible by the funds of ordinary people. It is an Ireland where a ski trip to a high-end Swiss luxury resort is called a "*bootcamp*" and in which a deal the report found cost at least €8 million more than perhaps it should have in reality cost us more than €118 million in a write-off. It was a deal that would bestow enormous benefits on all present if it went ahead and which, at a crucial stage, was not discussed by those present in the boot camp. As they were all very sophisticated businessmen, they would not dare to discuss it. The report confirms that our intrepid skiers did not say a word about the deal. The commission found that the trip to boot camp did not have any influence on Mr O'Brien's second round bid. It found that "Mr Dix and Mr O'Brien did not discuss any Siteserv bids at bootcamp".

So ends the entertaining chapter. It seems that while the lads were quite properly never discussing the deal at the bootcamp, the company co-founder, Mr. Niall McFadden, sent an email with confidential information to Mr. Dermot Hayes, an adviser to Denis O'Brien, who was in the race to buy the troubled building services firm.

Something else was happening at that very moment in a nearby Swiss resort. The 2012 World Economic Forum at Davos had just ended. It was the famous one where the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, told the great and the good of the world of finance that the crash and collapse of the Irish economy was explicable as a result of everyone having gone mad with borrowing. We all partied, as a previous Fianna Fáil Minister for Finance explained. That same week, Mr. O'Brien was boot-camping with friends and *The New York Times* reported:

Anglo Irish Bank is poised to pay more than a billion euros on Wednesday to unsecured creditors, drawing criticism from Irish taxpayers who are paying the enormous bill for the country's bank bailout. The payment is part of Ireland's effort to shore up Anglo Irish, a state-owned bank now known as the Irish Resolution Bank Corporation, in a rescue that ultimately could top 47 billion euros, or \$61 billion.

To be honest, given the sums dispensed by the State and the IBRC at the time, €8 million was hardly likely to be a major issue for those gathered in Davos or St. Moritz.

We all partied, we all went mad borrowing. That was the context of this deal. That was how the great and good explained the crash and the merciless austerity they imposed on people here. I do not believe that Enda Kenny had in mind the reckless borrowing of the great and good when he made his remarks up the road from Denis O'Brien and his mates in St. Moritz, nor the borrowing of Siteserv, which had accumulated other companies like an overenthusiastic collector in previous years, racking up unsustainable debts as it did. No. It was the workings of sophisticated businessmen. Anglo Irish Bank dealt with a large number of sophisticated businessmen. Many of them are back in business as we speak, having recovered fully from, or are even unscathed after, the financial collapse. It is not so for ordinary people, who paid for their sophisticated schemes. Far from St. Moritz and Davos, the bill has ultimately been paid by the people of this State, and it continues to be paid by them.

Let me end by remembering some of the measures from which we are still trying to recover, for example, housing and health, including waiting lists for operations for children crying in pain. Consider the measures that the State, through the budget, forced on people in the very month that our heroes were at boot camp and our Taoiseach described us all as having gone mad borrowing. The State imposed household property charges, it scrapped mortgage interest relief for new homeowners, it reduced the age limit in respect of children whose parents were trying to access the one-parent family payment, it reduced the earnings disregard for this group, who had consistently lived in high levels of poverty, it cut the back to education allowance, it attacked community employment schemes, it cut child benefit payments for families with three children, it cut the back to school clothing and footwear allowance, it cut benefits to carers, it cut fuel allowances, it cut hearing aid grants, and it cut the contributory and widow's pension entitlements. We cannot forget the major cuts to the budget for Traveller education and funding either. It was a war on the famous low-hanging fruit. Beside the previous austerity, it made its mark on ordinary citizens and the public services on which they relied. We have yet to recover from that.

The Siteserv deal and, indeed, Anglo Irish Bank itself were not the causes of that austerity, but these things and events are connected. We should remember that, while some were in St. Moritz manoeuvring the State bank into a deal for their benefit, the ultimate bill was paid in our schools, hospitals, emergency housing centres and vital public services.

I hope that the shareholders and directors of Siteserv and, indeed, the countless other devel-

opers and sophisticated businessmen enjoyed their bailout. This country still carries the scar of that as well as the continued servile attitude of our Government to serve their interests.

An Ceann Comhairle: Next is Deputy Berry, who is sharing time with Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute on this debate on the Siteserv scandal. Once again, we have a detailed and comprehensive report that outlines dubious and poor practices and conduct in the performance by certain elements of corporate Ireland ten years ago during the banking crisis. As Deputy Bríd Smith pointed out, the legacy of that crisis is unfortunately still with us.

I welcome the publication, belated as it is, of the report and thank Mr. Justice Brian Cregan for his hard work. I agree with his findings, and it is now up to the statutory bodies - the Revenue Commissioners, the Corporate Enforcement Authority and the IBRC special liquidators - to follow up on his comprehensive report.

Many people have been let down by the performance, first among them the taxpayer. We are potentially down €7.8 million already but, as the Taoiseach outlined, there is at least €12 million on top of that. The costs will be multiples of that amount by the time they are determined by Mr. Justice Cregan. The taxpayer has been let down.

Second, corporate Ireland has been let down. There are many good executives and hard-working business managers who behaved ethically throughout. Unfortunately, they are branded with the same brush. Anchorage, the underbidder for Siteserv, described in some of its correspondence that interacting with corporate Ireland was like working with a banana republic or one of the “stans”. That is certainly not the image we want to portray of our modern republic.

Third, the thousands of people who worked so hard in Siteserv were let down by some of their senior executives.

On a positive note, at least we can draw some comfort from the finding that IBRC acted in good faith. The chief financial officer comes out of this report quite well. It found that he conducted himself correctly and properly throughout the process and he had no prior knowledge of the under-the-surface behaviour. I was struck by how he declined legal representation at the commission’s oral representations because he had nothing to hide and he wanted to reduce the liability on the taxpayer. That should be commended.

This point lends itself neatly to what I want to say lastly on the cost of the inquiry. It will cost tens of millions of euro and has lasted seven years. I agree with the Taoiseach that we must devise a better system, one that allows for statutory inquiries to be done more swiftly and more cost effectively.

I welcome the report and agree with its findings. I look forward to a follow-up investigation by the Corporate Enforcement Authority and the Revenue Commissioners to ensure that those who have had adverse findings made against them are held accountable for their actions.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Who is going to be held to account for what happened at Siteserv? That is the major question that is not being answered in any of our debates. It is incredible that the Siteserv sale by the IBRC included a significant write-down of €119 million to Millington, a firm controlled by Denis O’Brien. That money was to come out of the taxpayers’ pocket. This happened at the same time that Siteserv was giving €5 million to its own shareholders. That

a debt-laden firm in receipt of a €119 million debt write-down could simultaneously afford to shell out generously millions of euro in dividends to shareholders is incredible and wrong. We also see from the report that Arthur Cox acted for both sides of the transaction, those being, Siteserv and Denis O'Brien. This is extraordinary.

The sale of any product usually has the objective of attracting as many bidders as possible in order to increase the price. That is the dynamic in an auction and most sales. What we have in this situation, though, is a finding by the commission of investigation into IBRC that the opposite happened. Anchorage was not contacted about the granting of exclusivity to Mr. O'Brien. It was wrong that this would happen in a State organisation. The commission found that the sale process conferred on Denis O'Brien a significant advantage over the other bidders seeking to acquire the Siteserv group. This is incredible for our country. It shows that maximisation of the financial return to the taxpayer was not the primary goal of the actors involved in the sale.

That the chairman of the sub-committee in Siteserv, Robert Dix, would holiday with one of the proposed buyers in St. Moritz, Switzerland, during the sales process is incredible.

6 o'clock

Anybody with any idea of impartiality would have recognised that they were not doing their job right in that regard. The key point here is that one person gave another person an advantage. A person or persons, as quoted in the report, gave misleading or incomplete information to the IBRC, which led to an advantage being given to another individual at a massive cost to the State. What is the next step? This is where accountability has to be achieved by the State. There is no point in anybody talking about this issue here unless we achieve some mechanism to get accountability. If there is no accountability, then there will be no change. If there are no consequences, then it will be repeated again in the State administration in the future.

I have written to the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, GNECB, requesting that it would investigate the authors of the misleading and incomplete information. I believe that An Garda Síochána needs to be given the necessary legislation so it can be the location of these types of investigations in future. Someone needs to be charged as a result of these actions. The Siteserv crisis was a massive crisis ten years ago. I remember at the time the Government was nearly in danger of falling. What happened? A commission of investigation was created to neutralise that political crisis on behalf of Fine Gael. It is a well-used political tactic used by governments. The investigations go for on so long that most people forget what they were about in the first place. The investigations are held in secret so that nobody knows what is happening. This is not justice. This report is not transparency, it is not accountability and it cost too much. Not only have the citizens had to pay for the loss of nearly €10 million in the original write-down, but the cost of the investigation was incredible. We were meant to have the final report in 2015 and it was meant to have cost €4 million, but here we are in the second half of 2022 and we just received the first of the original 38 modules.

In this Chamber the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, gave me an estimate that the final cost would be north of €30 million and, if they were to proceed to all of those 38 modules, it would be more than €70 million. Some €30 million is a multiple of the cost of the initial write-down of the commission's investigation. It is no small money. It would have paid for seven primary care centres in this State in the year that the commission of investigation was created. This is not justice. It is incredible that an investigation of wrongdoing in Ireland costs so much. It have to be a bureaucracy that would end up spending €30 million investigating a wrongdoing that

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led to a cost of €8 million to the State. No business or individual would spend multiples of the initial wrongdoing cost to find out what the wrongdoing was and, at the end, have a report that is meaningless in terms of accountability.

My worry is that we will get this particular report, that it will end up on a shelf somewhere in a Department, that it will gather dust and that, in a number of years, what happened in this area will just be part of a table-quiz answer. So far, I have heard no meaningful expression in the Government about the next steps in terms of accountability.

The Taoiseach, interestingly, is also responsible for another investigation that went on for a long time, which is the €1.4 billion sale of NAMA's Project Eagle portfolio to Cerberus in 2014. The original finishing date for that was meant to be 2018. It got extension after extension and excuses were given for the delay. At one stage, an excuse was given that there was a skeleton staff in terms of the commission. The Moriarty tribunal is still happening, believe it or not. It still has a staff, a cost and a budget 24 years after it was established, at a price tag of €65 million.

There is a real problem here and that has to change. The commission of investigations system is not working. It is not producing justice, it is not producing transparency and it is costing way too much. It needs to be overhauled. There should be a permanent commission of investigation that builds up the skills and staff necessary to deliver, within legislation. It should have to do that work within budgets and within time scales. If we do not do that, we will simply create commission of investigation after commission of investigation, each providing a report, each of those gathering dust and with nobody being held to account. Those actions that caused the crisis and the consternation in the first place will be repeated *ad nauseum*. The question is whether that is actually the purpose of the Government. Is that the solution? It is not the solution for the people of Ireland.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Mattie McGrath will be sharing time with Deputies O'Donoghue, Danny Healy-Rae, Michael Collins and Michael Healy-Rae.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Having looked at this report, I can see where the financial crash started. I can see an Ireland that was not about the ordinary person in the street who was not able to pay back a mortgage. It was about total corruption during a time when people had to emigrate, when people lost their homes and when many people lost their lives worrying about repaying loans. I remember clearly someone asking me a simple question back in 2008 or 2009. They asked where had all the money gone. They said it cannot just have disappeared. It did and that is what this report has told me.

Imagine any business being offered a restructuring loan of €70 million of interest only and approximately €80 million of interest-free debt, which was offered to Siteserv. It was a time when share options, commissions and valuations were not even being considered. Where did the compassion go when it came to the ordinary person who was trying to manage their debt? The banks at the time asked mortgage holders to fill out standard financial statements. What an embarrassment. However, nobody cared, not the regulator, not the Central Bank of Ireland and not the Government. What has changed today? The ordinary person on the street and in a rural area is at the bottom of the barrel compared to the Government. The Government does not care. It is looking after the big conglomerates. It is not looking after the ordinary people.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to speak about this today because this is serious. These tribunals will have to be banned completely and gotten rid of

because they are costing the State millions and maybe billions. There is no law that is being meted out to the people who have done wrong back over the years. The people to whom they have done the most wrong are the taxpayers, the hard-working people around the country who are out in the dark in the morning, who do not come home until after dark at night and who are paying savage amounts of tax.

We hear that this tribunal or investigation will cost €100 million to go after the figure of €8 million which is ridiculous, as previous speakers said. If that was a business, a company, a businessman or any single entity, they would not go after it like that. I am saying to the Minister of State that this should be delegated to An Garda Síochána. There should be a special unit in An Garda Síochána to deal with this kind of carry on because there is much too much of it. Denis O'Brien's name was mentioned. He was totally cleared and exonerated from any wrongdoing. I do not know who initiated this investigation, but this kind of carry on will have to stop, because the taxpayer is paying for every inch of it. There are treasonable offences going on. There must be someone to look after the Government because it has a write-down as well. Irish Sugar was sold and at the same time a factory was erected over in Bulgaria. I was told today that one of the power plants in the midlands that was closed down has been put up in Poland. To think that the people here are on the road every day now trying to pay multiples of what it is worth for diesel and petrol. The extra tax is going into the coffers of the Government.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What is at the core of all of this is that people's confidence in institutions of the State is being completely eroded. We can go back through the history of many of the tribunals that we had, and the overruns in what they actually cost. The IBRC commission of investigation and what is costing is like a runaway train. It is as if, when people are working for the State and when they are engaged by an arm of the Oireachtas to carry out some function, that they literally have a blank cheque, there are unlimited resources, it can take as long as it likes, and it makes no difference what the outcome is because it is only all a puff of smoke at the end of the day. The people actually never see any good for their money. They do not see any meaningful results. If there are not going to be meaningful results, would it not be a fine thing to spend the money on something that would produce a result for the hard-pressed taxpayers of this country? People are suffering at present. The one thing people want to see, feel and be assured of is that when their money is being spent, it is being spent wisely and prudently and that they are getting value for it. Looking at our track record, and what we have done with investigations and look-backs, we are looking back so much that we will fall over what is in front of us. We will not see what is in front of us because we are so hell-bent on looking backwards. It is actually a massive industry. It seems to be a very lucrative thing and the people involved are making vast amounts of money, giving vast amounts of time and coming up with very little at the end of it all. All I want to say is that now is the time to call this out for what it is, which is, to be honest, a waste of money.

Deputy Michael Collins: This commission was established in June 2015 to investigate certain transactions, activities and management decisions at the IBRC. The report of the commission of investigation on the transaction in relation to Siteserv and principles and policies within IBRC on the interest rates was published by the Taoiseach on Wednesday, 7 September 2022. I ask the Ministers of State what has changed today. There is no accountability in the banks. Will it take seven years to get answers from this Government to what happened in July of this year, when AIB stated that no cash would be available in its branches in my own constituency of Castletownbere, Dunmanway and Kinsale? What Minister has answered the questions on this issue to date in the Dáil? None. Who was responsible for this fiasco? We have not got an an-

swer. The people of Ireland are not puppets. We know that the Irish Government is the largest shareholder of the bank. Ministers must have known that this was happening. If the Minister of State gets up and tells me today that he did not know, when there are two senior Ministers and two junior Ministers for finance, I would have to accuse him of gross incompetence.

Deputies Mattie McGrath, Danny Healy-Rae and I decided to go to AIB headquarters, on behalf of the people of Ireland and our constituents, to force a meeting with the CEO of AIB, Colin Hunt, find a solution to the crisis, or we were not leaving that day. We were successful in our efforts to put an end to the ridiculous idea. A bank with no cash is equivalent to a restaurant with no food or a bar with no beer. The Minister who allowed this decision to be announced with no debate here in the Dáil needs to answer questions. Why was this announced after the Dáil was in recess for the summer? Did the Ministers of State know that this was going to be announced? If so, what did they do to try and stop it? Will we have to wait seven years for an answer, as we have waited seven years for this report? The people of this country want answers.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They knew since June. I found that out today.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am delighted to be able to speak on this matter, as one who was here on the night we voted for the bank bailout. It is the worst political decision I have ever made in my life. I have said that countless times. I suppose I will not be forgiven by people. I will not forgive myself, because it was a con job. Reckless behaviour went on, and unfortunately, it is still going on. On the night that NAMA was set up, I said that it was like a wild animal released in the woods. Nobody had any idea where it would end up. I am not saying that I am a prophet, but my God, how right I was, when we saw what went on and what happened with Project Eagle. I named the case of the Clonmel Arms Hotel Project Jackdaw, because that is what it was. The owner was able to get it back again when a new owner wanted to buy it. Within five minutes he put in the bid. A phone call came from agents working for NAMA to tell him that somebody else was interested in this business. The corruption and skulduggery that went on inside those organisations was shocking. It is still going on. Fool me once and it is my fault, but fool me twice and it is your fault. The people are aghast. The people are facing this winter with no heat. They are having to choose between buying food, heating their homes or buying clothes for their children. They are extremely irritated and annoyed. Would you blame them? The Government has taken them for porkies. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have been in power for the last God knows how many years - ten, 12 or 15 - since 2011. Now the Green Party is dictating policy to put people in penury. All the while, these tribunals are going on. They are only fodder machines that are creating fodder for the barristers, solicitors, legal eagles and the whole lot that are out there. It is a downright disgrace that it costs this kind of money to prove nothing and to tell us all what we already knew. It is shameful, corrupt, disgraceful and disgusting.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They knew since June that they were going to take the money out of the banks.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will not take a deep breath, although one should at the result of this report. If I take a deep breath, the time will be up. I have approximately six minutes to deal with a report that is over 1,500 pages long and has taken seven years. The conclusions are absolutely damning. It is significant that the Dáil Chamber is empty. The first senior Minister to be present since the Taoiseach left the Chamber is here. That is telling. No backbenchers are coming in to take their slots. I seldom make these points because I realise how busy people are but this is a very significant report.

What is the report about? Seven years after the commission was set up, the report tells us that there was a sale of Siteserv, a business. It sold for €44.3 million. At the time it was sold, Siteserv owed €162 million to the entity that is known as IBRC. The business was sold for €44.3 million. At that point, the taxpayer had put €43 billion into IBRC. What is all this about? The business was sold at such a low value that there was a write-off of €118 million that the taxpayer is accountable for. We are hearing today that this is a waste of time and we are rushing in to get rid of commissions of investigation. I would say that is all premature. I would ask the Deputies, and particularly the Government and the Minister, to actually read the report. Let us find out what happened here. The entity which was Anglo Irish Bank, on the one side, is declared a saint. That is the corporate angel. On the other side is Denis O'Brien, the personal angel who did nothing wrong. In the middle, we have Siteserv, which was sold, and inexplicably it was left to sell itself with absolutely no oversight. If I have the chance, I might return to the issue of the theoretical oversight that was in place. Three gentlemen are named in the report, Mr. Harvey, Mr. Dix and Mr. McFadden. They seem to have run rings around the angel on one side and the angel on the other side, the angel on one side being Mr. O'Brien, who did not know anything about anything, and the IBRC on the other side, in respect of which the judge found it acted in good faith, all its procedures were right and all its policies were okay. How did this happen, then? How did these three wise gentlemen run rings around everyone for their own benefit? How did they conceal? How is there a list of unauthorised disclosures and disclosures that were never made? How did that happen? How were the minutes of the official meetings of the board given to the Department on a regular basis in a board pack, but the *ad hoc* ones were never given? How did all of this happen? How did a boot camp take place in St. Moritz, with two of the important figures in this, the mere mortals in the middle of the two angels that did everything wrong, of course? They misled and told untruths. I will read some of those in a minute but they have been already read out by various Members. How did that happen? The sale was "tainted by impropriety". The report states that, "non-disclosures and concealments undermined the integrity of the Siteserv sale process and tainted it with impropriety." It goes on to state that, "The Company's decision... to grant exclusivity to Mr. O'Brien" and then continue with exclusivity to him was "tainted by impropriety". It further states, "The Company's decision not to disclose Mr O'Brien's Final Offer letter to the Bank... was tainted by impropriety". There is a whole list of these. In the time I have I cannot possibly set out it all but the report sets out details on Mr. Dix - a slip of the tongue might call it Mr. Fix but we will stick with Mr. Dix - Mr. Harvey and Mr. McFadden disclosing confidential information which, "was manifestly improper and wrong and undermined the integrity of the Siteserv sale process." The report states, "Mr Dix gave false, misleading and untruthful evidence in his sworn [evidence]". Mr. McFadden's evidence was not credible, according to the judge, on various aspects. The report states that, "The Commission does not accept Mr McFadden's evidence or his submissions" on the matter and further states that it was, "entirely implausible" and so on and so forth.

All of the time the angel on the left knows nothing and the angel on the right knows nothing. These undisclosed negotiations that were going on led to the extraordinary situation, according to the report, in which Mr. Harvey, as CEO of Siteserv and Mr. McFadden, one of the two co-founders, negotiated a deal for themselves and nobody was aware of it, even though the process was monitored by the board of directors of Siteserv; the sale subcommittee; two sets of corporate finance advisers, KPMG and Davy; the chief financial officer, who has been mentioned already; the company solicitor advising both sides, Arthur Cox, with Chinese walls of course; and a representative of the IBRC, Mr. Hobbs. I said I would come back to the monitoring. We have an inexplicable decision by the IBRC to allow the sale to be managed by these men who have now been found not to be credible in any way. I do not know why that was allowed but

then they think about that and say they will monitor it and they talk about getting PwC in to monitor it. They then do not do so but they get in Mr. Hobbs with his company. Mr. Hobbs is paid €5,000 per month into his company to monitor this situation. He is supposed to be at all of these meetings and report back but of course there is no written agreement with the IBRC. Even though it is angelic in all of this there is no written agreement so Mr. Hobbs goes to Site-serv and it determines what he should say and not say. There is a little bit of upset over that so something better is agreed but nothing is agreed on paper.

That is how this was monitored and we have Deputies here saying there is nothing in this. This is a shocking and damning indictment of how business was done. I will leave the conclusions to the judge but what I find difficult is an IBRC that knows nothing about anything and the judge says it acted in good faith. Nobody is asking how the procedures and processes in place allowed this to happen, what Mr. Hobbs was doing and what he was being paid for. Then we have the Department of Finance making a good decision to recommend an independent review, which was overruled by the Minister for Finance at the time, which he was entitled to do, so there was no independent review. Tremendous work is being done by internal members. The only time I see females mentioned is when they are doing the work in this. The rest was all male-dominated. They did tremendous work cataloguing and compiling everything. Later on it all goes missing and the judge finds it extraordinary that various documents go missing.

To be fair to my colleague I will stop but if the Ceann Comhairle has any influence I say this is a document that should be discussed for quite a number of hours on the floor of this Dáil so that we analyse what has happened and learn from it.

An Ceann Comhairle: In fairness to those who sit on the Business Committee, this was discussed there on Thursday last. It was the opinion of many members present that this needs a lot of further discussion, as does the process that gave rise to the protracted process of producing the report in the first instance.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This report was of the Houses, rather than of the Government, so the House should be in control of how it is debated rather than the Government deciding what the time is for a debate. We need to find a method that allows the Houses to set aside time to have this debate and then we might have a real debate. I would love to be able to hear a lot more of my colleagues' analysis of what went on within the report because that is vitally important.

We have been waiting a long time for this report, seven years in fact, and the fact that it has taken this long calls into question whether the manner in which public inquiries are undertaken in this country is adequate. It seems to me, based on this, that they are not adequately long but at the same time this is an important report and it is important that what went on is summed up here. It is my understanding that, due to the long duration of this investigation and the accumulation of large costs to the State, there are now talks of closing down the commission. I note that the Taoiseach said earlier that he will wait for the tribunal to comment on that before he makes his decision and of course he will wash his hands of it and say it is not his decision but the decision of the tribunal that we should go away from this. Once again the political system walks away from this scot-free and has no involvement.

There is no doubt that urgent reform is needed and I would hope that if there was a question of closing down the commission then a vote on that motion would be brought to the Dáil to consider because surely that is something this House should decide on and we could discuss why it needs to happen. Although it took far too long to come to a conclusion, the findings in

this report are absolutely in the public interest. The report details a catalogue of issues which showed the sale process was undermined from the very beginning. It explicitly states that the Siteserv transaction was so “tainted by impropriety and wrongdoing” that the “transaction was not commercially sound”. Chapter 15 of the report details bonuses that cost Siteserv more than €800,000, which was more than the amount of Siteserv’s corporate finance advisers’ fees combined. It goes on to state that, “In the context of Siteserv, these were bonus payments on a lavish scale and entirely unacceptable for a company that was costing the taxpayer almost €118 million in loan write-offs and losses.” I understand that the Taoiseach has said the cost of the Siteserv inquiry “could exceed €30 million” and I agree this is an indication of a broken system. However, we are talking about the sale of a company that has cost the taxpayer more than €118 million, in a time of real hardship in this country, when people were struggling to stay afloat, facing constant cuts and being hit with tax after tax, while Siteserv was lining its pockets with extravagant bonuses and charging ordinary people for it. It is an absolute disgrace.

There is no doubt this investigation was absolutely necessary and I would like to assure the Government that I have not forgotten that we were initially told by the then Minister for Finance, Michael Noonan, that an inquiry into the transaction was not necessary. It took three years of opposition pushback before an inquiry was sought and I would like to take this opportunity to commend Deputy Catherine Murphy on her pursuit of this. I have no doubt this inquiry would not have happened if it were not for her endless work.

There are many areas of concern in the report, including the fact that Denis O’Brien was offered exclusivity on the deal; the fact that a finance official leaked confidential Siteserv sale details that would ultimately alert Denis O’Brien to the sale; the fact that IBRC wrote off €119 million of the €150 million that Siteserv owed; the fact that IBRC lost out on between €700,000 and €2.1 million by not investigating shareholder payments; and the fact that the Commission found that no tax was paid by individuals on the capital gains on the sale of the 500 shares in Siteserv for €2.3 million. Denis O’Brien was innocent in all of this and knew nothing of it, yet he gave more than 15% of the new company to individuals because he knew nothing about it. That stretches anybody’s belief that this report finds everything that should be found and that was certain to be found.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is interesting that all the speaking slots on this particular matter were not taken up. I do not know if it is something we will be returning to in the future. It warrants a return.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will take the extra time.

An Ceann Comhairle: So be it.

Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Institutional Burials Act 2022 (Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam) Order 2022: Motion

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

— having regard to the enactment and subsequent commencement of the Institutional

Burials Act 2022; and

— noting that a draft order to be made by the Government, prepared in accordance with section 7(1) of the Institutional Burials Act 2022, has been duly laid before Dáil Éireann on 26th August, 2022, together with a Statement of Reasons for establishing an Office of Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam; and approves the draft Institutional Burials Act 2022 (Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam) Order 2022 for the purpose of establishing an Office of Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam.

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this motion before the House. This motion is before the Houses following approval by Government, on 27 July last, of my proposal to establish an independent office to lead an intervention at the site of the former mother and baby institution in Tuam. The proposal was made following the signing into law of the Institutional Burials Act 2022 earlier that month.

The Act, which provides the underlying legislative basis for the intervention, allows the Government, by order, to direct an intervention at a site where manifestly inappropriate burials of people who died in residential institutions have taken place. An order can be made when the criteria in the legislation are met and where a resolution approving the draft order has been passed by each House of the Oireachtas.

The draft order for approval this evening directs me, as Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to establish an Office of Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam. It sets out the functions to be performed by the director and the land in respect of which the director may perform those functions. The functions assigned to the director provide for him or her to oversee a phased forensic-standard excavation, recovery, analysis and re-interment of remains across the full available site in Tuam. The order also provides that the director will carry out an identification programme as an additional function for the intervention.

The situation uncovered in Tuam is truly horrifying. It has shocked people across the country and the world. The interment of children's remains at the site is clearly manifestly inappropriate and the statement of reasons for making the order, which has also been laid before the Houses, sets out how the site meets the requirements in terms of the legislation. As I said before, what happened in Tuam is a stain on our national conscience. It is incumbent on us to address the situation as soon as possible now that the necessary legislation is in place. I am grateful for this early opportunity to bring the motion before the Houses.

Subject to a resolution this evening, a resolution in the Seanad next week and the completion of environmental screening requirements for the site, the Government can make the order and the office can be established. I am committed to appointing a director and starting the excavation at the earliest opportunity. In order to ensure that work can start promptly, preparatory works have already commenced in my Department. Environmental screening of the site is under way. My officials have been seeking sanction from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and liaising with the Public Appointments Service on the recruitment process for a director. Officials are engaging with the Office of Public Works in relation to sourcing a suitable premises for the new office. Preparations are under way for the appointment of an advisory board to support and guide the director in his or her role. It is anticipated that the recruitment of a director will take a number of weeks. Once appointed, the director will need to engage a range of appropriately qualified experts to undertake the excavation, recovery and post-recovery analysis processes. Engineering works and the construction of onsite facilities

will also be required in advance of excavation of the site, which it is expected can begin in early 2023. I commend this motion to the House.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The excavation of the Tuam site, the identification of victims and the dignified burial of remains will happen only because of the work of Catherine Corless, survivor groups, campaigners and their relatives and allies. Any attempts to intervene at Tuam and other locations have been resisted by governments and the State for decades. A rotten partnership between the State and the Roman Catholic Church perpetuated these abuses and actively opposed any form of accountability and justice.

The Tuam mother and baby home alliance was forced to protest again outside the Dáil today due to its disgraceful treatment by the Minister. It reiterated its call for the role of the coroner as prescribed in law to hold an inquest to establish the cause of death in compliance with international law. It is highlighting how the Act intentionally does not meet international human rights standards. It only applies in circumstances of inappropriate burial, but not in cases of unnatural or unexplained death in these institutions. Despite pleas from survivors and human rights experts and amendments from me and others, the Minister has created a law that would limit the number of possible interventions and the scale of any intervention.

The Minister told me this Act should not cover examinations based on unnatural death as that is the responsibility of the coroners and An Garda Síochána. He knows well this has not happened and will not happen. Coroners have still not been directed to investigate known mass graves by this and previous governments. Only public and international pressure at the horror of Tuam forced the then Fine Gael Government to act.

The uncovering of the truth, no matter how uncomfortable, must happen. The long history of abuse, forced incarceration, family separation, illegal adoptions and unnatural death needs to be fully investigated. We need a survivor-led transitional justice process. Unfortunately, this Government's treatment of survivors and disregard for their preferences offer little hope for the justice they seek and deserve.

The Tuam mother and baby home alliance also protested about other issues today. It cites the Minister's recent unilateral decision to deny the alliance's members and those who provided testimony to the confidential committee the opportunity to have those testimonies reviewed by an independent expert with a human rights background, as he previously promised. It is standard practice with this Government that survivors found this out by reading the work of Elaine Loughlin in the *Irish Examiner* and not from the Minister or the Department. It is disgraceful.

There is a clear pattern. Any progress comes after soul draining campaigning from a dedicated group of people and massive public outcry. When Government eventually reacts, it always reacts just enough to get a good headline and satisfy public attention until the news cycle moves on. Today is another example of this. The headlines will look for the Minister but what about the survivor and family protests? What about the failure to meet human rights standards? What about the mass graves that will never be investigated unless something changes? Our shameful history of State and church abuse and mass incarceration of young mothers, children, people experiencing mental health conditions and disabled people has left many locations of known and suspected burials. Academics and activists have charted the scale of unnatural deaths in mother and baby homes, county homes, industrial schools, psychiatric hospitals and other institutions. What about these victims and their relatives? Where is their justice?

I quickly came to the conclusion during pre-legislative scrutiny that this Act was designed to solely intervene in Tuam. While this is essential and welcome, many other sites across the country require methodical and respectful excavation. The Act is intentionally filled with barrier after barrier to prevent it being applied to any other location. The State does not want this issue properly examined. There is an aversion to giving survivors their information, allowing them to tell their stories and investigating our shameful past. The Government is committed to doing just enough to create very limited prospects for justice. If Government Members have convinced themselves they are doing the right thing, I inform them that they are not. Today is an emotional and welcome day for the survivors of Tuam and the many people who know or hope that their loved ones are buried there, but it is a grim reminder to many others that their loved ones buried in other sites will never get justice.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will call Deputy Connolly and then revert to the order on the basis that Deputies Cairns and Connolly were here at the start of the debate.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome and support this. The motion was approved in July and we will set up what we promised we would in relation to Tuam. It begs the question as to whether it is just Tuam and what about all the other places, as has been referred to.

As I am wont to do, I will put it in context. The expert technical group's report entitled Options and Appropriate Courses of Action was published in December 2017. The Government announced a forensic excavation in October 2018. The then Minister, Katherine Zappone, made some comments about taking the right actions. In November 2021, when nothing had happened, Dr. Niamh McCullagh, a forensic archaeologist, among others, called for a full excavation of the site as soon as possible so that DNA could be identified. She said: "As a forensic archaeologist I have never walked away from human remains in that context. The measures that were put in place to protect the site [in 2017]... were temporary measures, they were not designed to last longer than six months." Yet the site remains there unattended and not properly sealed off. As was mentioned by Deputy Cairns, the work on the ground has pushed this Government and every government reluctantly. From day one, I have acknowledged the Minister's bona fides although they are wearing thin in light of what he has done in going back on his promise. On the ground, we have seen Catherine Corless and, well before her, Mary Raftery. I also want to mention Patricia Burke Brogan, who died last week - may she rest in peace - with regard to the work she did in respect of the Magdalen laundries, in particular the play *Eclipsed*. I could mention many more. The groups on the ground have certainly forced us and dragged us every step of the way. I remember being at a meeting in Tuam and the Ministers present were talking about closure. That was such an insult when we wanted openness and accountability. It showed the level of misunderstanding there was. I do not know whether it was benign or otherwise. Why have I lost faith? It is because we have no redress scheme nor any sight of one. However, we know it will exclude anyone who spent less than six months in an institution. I understand the Minister is in receipt of correspondence from more than 30 clinicians who work in the area of childhood trauma. On 21 November, in response to the publication of the redress scheme, they wrote that "there is no quantum of time that allows us to think about the impact of childhood trauma. Thus, having an arbitrary period of six months' exposure is simply that, arbitrary. Listen to that word: "arbitrary". The letter continues, "What is known from research in the area of childhood trauma is that it is the combination of adversity and quality of relationships which confer risk" rather than time. The redress scheme proposed also excludes those who were boarded out. Our own special rapporteur for children, Professor Conor O'Mahony, said, "Any child who experienced severe neglect, emotional abuse or physical abuse in a board-

ed-out placement in circumstances where the State's inspection regime was clearly defective would have an entitlement to an apology and to redress in the same way as any other child who experienced neglect or ill-treatment in a residential institution".

My time is short. None of this makes sense to me. Without referring to the Minister personally, the system has learnt absolutely nothing. We continue to begrudge and to do everything belatedly. If we are seriously interested in redress, let us do it right. The Minister planned to have an independent human rights review of the testimony given by the more than 550 people who came forward but he has gone back on that. I do not think he should ever have promised that because he was never in a position to do it. He was never going to question the establishment narrative given to us by the three wise commissioners, the narrative that told us that the evidence of those who came forward was contaminated and should therefore be treated with caution. They were never going to go back on what they said but the Minister promised to go outside of that and to have an independent review and he has gone back on that. To add insult to injury, he said that he will allow the people to come forward again, if they wish, to tell the story again and have it archived or displayed, if that is what they want, or for what was given to be used. This ignores the pain and the suffering of the more than 550 people who came forward with great courage to tell their stories, which were then described as contaminated by the three wise commissioners. No such caveat was applied to those who came forward from the religious organisations or to the doctors and solicitors who came forward. The Minister should never have promised that but, having promised it, he should have seen it through or, at the very least, given a proper analysis as to why he changed his mind and told the people on the ground personally, people who instead heard of it through an announcement in the newspaper. Of course, there are also all the legal challenges with regard to that commission's report that were upheld or settled. In all of this, the most important thing from day one was trust. That trust is not there.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating me. I apologise for missing my speaking slot. I welcome the creation of the agency in respect of Tuam. It is a positive step forward and something which we all know is long overdue. We all know the various people, particularly Catherine Corless, who have campaigned for this for a great length of time. We also know that time is of the essence in light of the age of many survivors and relatives of survivors. I sincerely hope that we will also see this type of development in other areas where it is deemed necessary. I missed the start but I believe Deputy Cairns made reference to the group that is outside today. It was one of that group's desires that this would not just be done in respect of Tuam despite those in the group coming from and representing Tuam. It goes to show the instinct among survivors to ensure that it is not just about themselves and their own individual stories but also about survivors as a collective. They are always looking out for each other, for want of a better term. It is important that this be expanded and not just be done for Tuam. However, it is also important to acknowledge that this is happening. It is a commitment that was made and is actually coming to fruition. There may still be some concerns regarding the role of the coroner although I believe they were clarified in the most recent draft of the legislation. However, any reiteration of that role would be helpful for survivors.

It is our first day back. When I saw that this motion was on the paper for discussion today, I thought that the commitment to an independent review that was made last year had to be mentioned. I apologise because I was late and so may have missed reference to this in the Minister's speech but, if he did not make such a reference, perhaps he could mention in his closing remarks what exactly has happened in that regard. We have all spoken a great deal about how, time and again, survivors, their relatives and their families have been let down. Commitments

and promises have been made that have not been followed through on. We need a really clear answer as to what exactly happened there. People want to know. Obviously, we want to see that commitment honoured. People welcomed it when the Minister made the commitment last year. Deputy Cairns mentioned that people found out about this in the newspaper. That is something the people who were outside today mentioned. They feel really strongly about this. They were very disappointed to read about this in the newspaper. Is there another explanation for all of this? I hope that there is. Perhaps, if it has not been touched on, the Minister can expand on that.

The Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will probably be inviting the Minister before it and will certainly be having discussions about this. It is important for survivors that any commitments made are followed through on. Over the years, we have had a history of letting these people, the vast majority of whom are women, down. They were failed by the State in the first instance. People who were made to go into these institutions or who were born into them started off being failed by the State. The last thing we want, as a more modern generation in this Chamber, is to continue to fail them in that regard. It is not good enough and we need to look at that. We need to ensure that any commitment or promise we or the current Government or Minister give is followed through on and acted on.

However, the motion is specifically about the creation of the agency. It is a good thing and a positive step forward. Hopefully we will see the same provided in the other areas where it is needed. However, I would like some clarity on what exactly happened and how this came about because, as far as I am aware, a review group was set up to look into who would be the best or most appropriate person to act as independent reviewer. When that commitment was given, it was probably one of the few times people felt they were being listened to. To see it being rowed back on is very disappointing. “Disappointing” is probably not a strong enough word. It would be welcome if we could get some clarity on that.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I support the motion. Like my colleagues, I will raise the issue of the promised independent review of testimony. We have Elaine Loughlin and Conall Ó Fátharta of the *Irish Examiner* to thank for the report in that newspaper dated 29 August in which it was said that “A promised independent review of testimony given by mother and baby home survivors has now been abandoned by the Government.” I understand that the Minister is speaking directly to a motion in respect of the creation of the office of director of authorised intervention in respect of Tuam. However, this would have been the first opportunity since this news broke in August for the Minister to make some utterance to the House in respect of why the promised independent review of testimony has now been abandoned. For many people, whether in Tuam, Bessborough, or wherever, that is the kernel of the issue right now. They feel deeply traumatised by the fact that the independent review is not now going to take place. It is for us to speak for those people. It is a bit of a stretch to ask those people who have given testimony already to now create a new initiative. I will quote from the Minister’s adviser, who I assume issued the statement. It read:

Having considered the matter, the minister believes that a new initiative to support survivors to tell their personal story, so that it can be formally recorded and accepted as part of the official record, provides the best opportunity for responding to the concerns of survivors in a meaningful way.

To expect a person who has already given evidence to now submit evidence again is an insult to those people. I cannot for the life of me see how the creation of a museum or a na-

tional centre for research and remembrance will have the confidence of those very people who have given evidence and who feel their efforts and the sheer trauma they had to go through to tell their stories have been abandoned and disregarded. I was very hopeful that we were on a pathway with this process and that by at least putting in place an independent review of the testimony, the Minister would have repaired the damage done and people would have moved in the same direction going forward. Until such time as that issue is dealt with and confronted, and until an independent review is carried out of testimony, nobody is going to have any confidence whatsoever in the process. The entirety of the process is now tainted.

I was hopeful that our generation of politicians would have dealt with this head-on. When we were in the national convention centre I said I hoped this would not come down to an issue of money and resources. I fear now that that is where this is at. I am fearful that the Minister is afraid to reopen this process again on the basis of resources and what type of potential litigation might take place as a result of the reopening of such a process. I do not think we should be so cautious. We should be the generation of politicians that deal with this head-on. We owe a duty of care to everybody who was involved in this issue to at least, as a mark of respect, carry out the independent review of testimony. There is a question for the Minister in respect of the proposed memorandum to go to Cabinet. As an institution, whether on the floor of this House or in committee, we need to provide some forum where the Minister can come before us to answer questions about why a process to create that independent review of testimony was abandoned. What were the modalities of that? This is unfinished business.

Deputy Seán Canney: I am delighted to get the opportunity to speak on the resolution the Minister has brought before the House today. As a person who is from Tuam and who went to school in Tuam, this is an issue that is close to my heart in many ways. It has created a sense of a stain on or shadow over Tuam as a town. Tuam is a very good town. It is the capital town in our county of Galway and has the finest people living there. While I agree that the Minister needs to proceed with this effort to appoint a director, one thing is most important with whatever happens from now on. The Minister set out in his speech how a director would be appointed, consultants and experts would be coming in with him or her and that an office will be set up to manage the excavation and all that goes with it. However, it is important that there is local engagement with the people of the town. The office should be set in the town and there should be a liaison aspect to the brief that this director will have so people from the locality who want to know what is going on can find out. We talk about setting out the lands that will be excavated. There are people living in close proximity to the centre of the site who have serious concerns about their properties having to be excavated, including their back gardens and so on. There is a huge amount of work to be done with the local communities and local people on the ground, as well as working with all the other stakeholders. I re-emphasise the fact that the most important stakeholders are the people in Tuam who have been the centre of attention from media worldwide. So be it, but they need to understand what is happening and when it will be happening and they need to have somewhere to go where they can meet somebody if they have a query or an issue, someone who is not based in Dublin or anywhere else in the country. I would expect that to happen.

It is important that we get on with the excavation and trying to identify the children who are buried there. It is also important that that moves as fast as possible. I am sure there is a lot of procurement to be done in terms of engineering, staff and consultants. I hope that will not be clogged up in processes that will delay the whole thing going ahead. We need to get down to getting on with the business as set out in the legislation previously passed here in the Dáil.

I welcome this further step but the people of Tuam and the surrounding areas, the people who believe they have relatives buried there, must know and understand what the next steps are. It must be set out in plain language for them so they understand what is happening and when it will be happening. The director and the office that is to be set up will have a huge role to play in making sure people understand what is happening and when it will be happening. That is the one message I want to give the Minister this evening. We need a hands-on approach on the site from now on because we are getting so near to focusing back on the site itself in a very physical way. I thank the people in the locality for being very understanding of all the intrusion in their lives over the last number of years. For some of them, it has been a tough time. Now is the time for us to make sure we ease what will have to happen over the next number of months and years.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. They were absolutely right to recognise the pivotal role Catherine Corless has played in this. We would not be here today but for her dogged persistence in highlighting what happened in Tuam. The Deputies are right to credit her with dragging the Irish State to this place today.

The passing of this legislation was a lengthy process, one that involved very substantive engagement with the joint committee and significant amendments in both the Dáil and the Seanad.

7 o’clock

When I visited the site at Tuam last year, I also met four separate groups on the day. Their key request related to the coroner and removing the exclusion of the coroner’s jurisdiction that was originally in the legislation. We removed it because we heard what people had said. The reasons that officials or I put forward, that it was not as big a concern, did not matter. It was a concern for survivors and we acted on that concern. We made other changes in the legislation. Deputy Connolly referred to Dr. Niamh McCullough. I am grateful for the advice she gave to our Department, particularly about strengthening the processes that will take place following the excavation of the site. This post-recovery analysis gives us a better opportunity to return sets of remains to family members. There is a clear requirement written in the legislation that work taking place on this site must be done to an international forensic standard. I hope that provides some comfort to families in Tuam and potentially in other sites about the type of work that will take place. In the amendment process, we also added an advisory board which will be convened and will have survivors or relatives of residents of the institution. It also has an opportunity to involve the wider sector, as Deputy Canney said.

It is important to remember that this legislation is not site-specific. It makes provision for interventions in other sites as well. I have engaged with relatives of people at the Bessborough site. My Department intervened in a planning application last year for work to take place on the site of the presumed children’s burial ground there. In August of this year, I visited Sean Ross Abbey and met relatives there. We discussed their concerns about the potential wider burial ground there. We are working with survivors to get a resolution relating to that site.

Deputy Connolly mentioned the redress legislation. This legislation has been worked on by my Department over the summer and I will bring it to Cabinet in October to seek approval for the final Bill and to bring it rapidly through the Houses and the committee so that we can provide redress to family members. The Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has written to me about the testimonies before the confidential committee and I will provide a comprehensive response. The Committee on Children, Equality, Disability,

Integration and Youth will consider that.

When the comments were made at the lecture in Oxford about the treatment of the testimonies, we all received correspondence from survivors. What shone through most clearly in that correspondence was the concern from the 550 survivors who had given testimony that, having gone to the effort and, in many cases, trauma of reliving what happened, their words were nowhere. We know their testimonies are not in the commission's report. There are just brief extracts of them. Prior to that, my officials had secured the tapes of those interviews. As we know, those tapes were meant to be deleted but we secured them and have them now. I am seeking to provide an opportunity to those that gave testimony so that their words are not just hidden away on a tape somewhere but are actually part of the record, whether they wish to express those words themselves or they wish to use the tapes as evidence of that record. I am conscious that there are other survivors who did not participate in the confidential committee who may wish to have their personal stories of what happened to them in institutions also expressed on the record. That is what I am attempting to provide for survivors in the proposals that I am bringing forward. I will write to the committee in more detail and the committee can decide about the next steps. That is the proposal that I will present.

I thank Deputies for their consideration of the motion today. My Department and I will work to ensure, assuming assent of the Dáil and Seanad, that the agency can be set up as quickly as possible and that this essential work in Tuam can proceed as quickly as possible to provide that small measure of comfort to families at the end of this process.

Question put and agreed to.

Measures to Assist with Household Bills: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— the latest round of announcements of electricity price hikes ranging from 27 per cent to 34 per cent to take effect next month; and

— that households are dealing with annual electricity bills, some €1,000 higher than they were a year ago;

condemns the constant dithering by this Government despite the urgency of the cost-of-living crisis including:

— the refusal of this Government to bring forward an emergency budget before the summer recess despite calls on them to do so, with people left to face the full impact of continuing energy price increases alongside wider increases such as food and back-to-school costs without adequate support as a result;

— the opposition by Minister Eamon Ryan, acting on behalf of the Irish Government, to reform the wholesale electricity market back in October 2021 which would if implemented at the time have helped to reduce the bills of households and businesses

sooner; and

— the failure of the Government to sufficiently accelerate the development of our own renewable sources of energy in and around the island which are key to ensuring energy affordability, sustainability and security over the medium-term; and

calls on the Government, as part of a wider package of cost of living measures, to immediately:

— cut household electricity bills and cap them at 2021 prices;

— introduce cash payments to assist low- and middle-income households with their other energy bills;

— make a double Child Benefit payment for every child in recognition that households with children tend to spend more on energy bills; and

— introduce a windfall tax so that excess profits are not made during the period of the crisis.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I am sharing time with Deputies Ó Broin, Mac Lochlainn, Kerrane and Doherty. This motion sets out a number of proposals that we believe are essential to address the cost-of-living crisis. They are specifically focused on the price of electricity. I call for support for the motion across the House. We need an aggressive and comprehensive response to an unprecedented crisis which is having a significant impact on families and is the most pressing concern for families around the country. We set out in the motion our proposals to cut household electricity bills and cap them at 2021 prices, to introduce cash payments to assist low and middle-income households with their other energy bills, to make a double child benefit payment for every child in recognition of the fact that larger households have greater energy and electricity demands, and, importantly, to introduce a windfall tax in order that excess profits are used for the benefit of our population and people in need. The motion has a number of proposals which will be part of a suite of social welfare and taxation measures that Sinn Féin will propose in our alternative budget in advance of the Government's budget.

In my contribution, I will focus on a couple of aspects, namely, the electricity price cap and the windfall tax. They are intimately related proposals. A clear recognition that the market is broken and must be reformed underpins both proposals. This has been clear for over a year. Gas is being used as a weapon of war. Any of us who have engaged with those working in this sector have had it indicated to us that it was apparent, as far back as this time last year, or earlier, that the tap was being turned by Russia.

The electricity price cap is the right move at the right time. It provides certainty for families who are under huge pressure. It provides a reprieve for families at a time of great pressure and uncertainty. While it is not a permanent solution, it buys time to introduce the sort of systematic reforms that are needed. We have to get the balance of universal measures and targeted measures right. We need to lean towards prioritising targeted measures. As a universal measure, it has the advantage of maintaining the link with usage. It is, in effect, an electricity unit price cap as opposed to an electricity bill price cap. We saw the Government's proposal for a credit being introduced slowly earlier this year. We have seen the various kites flown in recent weeks: it could be a €600 credit over three payments or it could be further beyond that; it would be

denied to Travellers in halting sites, as it was before; it would be denied to some living in multi-unit buildings where there is only one meter; and it would be given on the double to people with holiday homes - energy credits will be a bonanza for those people. That proposal from the Government has the same weaknesses that it always had. It goes hand in hand with a windfall tax, individual and important elements to address a broken market, and the super-excess and crisis-related profits of energy companies. There are two parts to any windfall tax, which are the huge profits being made by energy generators, which the European Union refers to as a solidarity tax, and the huge windfall that arises for renewable companies because of the pegging of gas prices to electricity prices. The suggestion that Sinn Féin is at risk of writing a blank cheque to energy companies is the greatest bluff of them all, especially coming from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, who are the parties that sold off our gas assets. Vermilion Energy reported a 267% increase in Corrib profits between 2020 and 2021. In the second quarter of this year, the parent company recorded €214 million in profits, up 28% year on year. That was all sold off to the private interests. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael also sold off our gas utility companies, deregulated the market and, as they did with so many things, treated energy as a commodity not as a right and a utility. This Government fought for a year against reforms of the EU energy market. Why? It was to protect the profits of the energy companies in the hope, nothing more, that they would invest those profits in new energy infrastructure, some of which was hoped would be renewables. We missed the opportunity of the Iberian exemption, despite having a real opportunity to make the exact same case. This Government has a clear track record of not doing enough. The Sinn Féin proposals contained in tonight's motion point in the right direction.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank my colleagues, Deputies O'Rourke and Doherty and others for tabling this important motion today. Like Deputies right across the House, pretty much every day I am dealing with families who are experiencing a level of financial stress that I certainly have never seen in my time as a Deputy in this House. For example, I am dealing with housing assistance payment, HAP, tenants who are unable to keep up with the cost of living and their top-up to the landlords. They are begging their local authorities to give them a discretionary uplift, which they are being refused, and therefore they are imminently at risk of homelessness. I am also dealing with private renters who are just above the thresholds for social housing and who are working two jobs to keep the roof over their head. This is despite the fact that the Government has not increased the social housing thresholds since 2011 and continues to refuse to do so. Again, those same families are unable to make ends meet or are fearful of what will happen if they get a notice to quit, which would render them homeless. I am talking to mortgage holders who have now had two interest rate hikes. If the second hike is passed on by their bank, that will wipe out everything we are hearing from Government with regard to the meagre measures it is proposing to deal with the rising cost of energy. I raise these three cases because they are real-life cases that I and many other Deputies are dealing with day in and day out. Common to all of these families is that they simply cannot afford the cost of heating their homes or using utilities to keep their children fed and to keep clean the clothes on their backs. The idea that giving those people, on its own, a cash payment no matter what amount, simply does not deal with the key concern they have which is that even with a cash payment, the prices themselves are too high and people are fearful of further price hikes.

The great merit to the Sinn Féin proposal that Deputy McDonald outlined earlier today, which Deputy O'Rourke has just outlined, and which Deputies Doherty and Mairéad Farrell will outline in fine detail when we publish our alternative budget on Friday week, is that it deals with the immediate cost by dragging those costs back to summer 2021 levels, it puts money back in a targeted way into the pockets of lower income families, and it ensures that they will

not have any further price rises between now and February or March of next year. I do not see how anybody could think that this was not the most sensible way to approach this.

Today the Taoiseach was incredibly disingenuous when he used the phrase “blank cheque”. From all of the media that Deputies Doherty, McDonald and others did yesterday, the Taoiseach is aware that the purpose of our proposed windfall tax is to be a tax on excessive profits if companies choose to try to use it as a blank cheque, which is something they would not be able to do under our proposals. This is sensible and it is needed. If the Government does not do something like this, those families out there who are under such enormous pressure, will have the worst winter in decades. It does not have to be that way. The Minister can make a real difference and I urge him to support this proposal.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: When it comes to the energy crisis, workers and families are really being failed by this Government. The Government announced a cost-of-living package back in February when inflation was at about 5.5%. For much of that time the Government added what was announced then with what was announced in the budget four months beforehand, which was the Government’s cost-of-living budget. Throughout recent months, inflation has climbed to more than 9% and yet people are still waiting for help. Aside from the electricity credit, which by the time it was paid nearly five months after it was announced had been wiped out, the only other energy support that was announced was the fuel allowance. The fuel allowance is an extremely limited scheme. The vast majority of households, and particularly workers, are locked out of the fuel allowance. They do not receive it and they have never received it.

In June the additional needs payment was announced. It tweaked what was there in relation to the urgent needs payment. This was welcome. I welcomed it at the time. This, however, is one way in particular in which Government is failing households. This payment was widely promoted by Ministers. I would like to think that it was presumed obvious that demand for this payment would be high given that it was particularly aimed not just at those on social welfare but also at workers. Yet, the entire process around this emergency social welfare payment is up in a heap. Demand for that scheme in January or February was about 5,000 or 6,000 applications. As of July, it was more than 17,000 applications. Figures I received earlier this month from the Department of Social Protection show that 95% of current applications are taking between five to eight weeks to be finalised. Can the Minister imagine having a bill that cannot be paid in a household struggling and waiting up to two months for what is supposed to be an emergency payment? Before the Dáil recess, the Minister had said that the Department was giving consideration to putting that payment online as an option for people. That is still, apparently, being looked at by the Department. We need to return these payments to the community welfare officers within our communities if we are going to make sure that this support is available to people when they need it. Applications like that need to be resourced properly in order that people get support when they need it. If they are waiting for two months, it is no good. Clearly, demand for that scheme is going to increase. The proposals in this motion are exactly what is needed. They reduce costs and put money back into people’s pockets. Existing supports that are there need to be resourced. Emergency social welfare payments cannot take two months to be processed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The response of the Government to this energy crisis has been dithering, dithering and dithering again. If one looks at the league table of European countries and what they have provided to their people as a percentage of GDP, Ireland is right there at the bottom of the list. Only Denmark is worse. This is just a shameful response to an unprecedented energy crisis that our people face, be it home heating oil, solid fuels, or petrol

or diesel for their cars. Wherever they turn, for businesses, for workers or for families, this has had a crippling burden on them. The Government's strategy has been to wait until the winter and put something on the table then. What Sinn Féin has put before the Minister must be implemented. It would cut and cap electricity charges to the levels prior to this crisis and there would be direct, targeted payments for those who most need it. There are issues around child benefit and there is also the need to address the rent crisis due to the Government's shambolic management of our housing system.

This Government has been appalling in its response to the energy crisis. It is at the bottom of the European league table. Centre-right politicians across Europe are ahead of the Government when it comes to the taxes that are required - the windfall taxes on the companies. Across the water, Nicola Sturgeon has banned evictions and said there needs to be a freeze on rents. All across Europe there are examples but the Government is behind the curve. It needs to listen to Sinn Féin tonight and finally do what is right by our people.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is time for the Government to wake up to the reality of where ordinary workers are at. Families are facing a cost of living crisis they have never seen before. Many of them are being forced into decisions they thought they would never have to make, like whether to put food on the table or to keep the heat going. Families that once would donate to the food banks are now standing in those queues waiting for those same parcels. The choice before the State is simple. It can, on one hand, allow citizens to fall into poverty and financial hardship or wake up to the reality, step up to the plate and fulfil its duty and act. That is what the Sinn Féin motion before the House calls on the Government to do today, to act in the interest of our people in the middle of this cost of living crisis.

Our motion is very clear and has a number of areas. First is energy. Compared to last summer with the winter we now face into, households are paying an average €1,300 more on their electricity bills. Sinn Féin says that needs to stop. We need to cut those bills for those families, workers and households. We need to bring it back to its level prior to the crisis, back to €1,000 on average. We need to do that during the period of this winter and to not only give families a reduction in their electricity bills but also something so valuable in these pressing times, certainty that the bills will not increase and that on this issue the Government has their back and can say "we are with you on this and are taking the pressure from you". It is a simple proposal. It is one the Minister's European colleagues in other jurisdictions have implemented. Romania has extended the cap on energy prices until August next year. France has nationalised its system to allow for certainty in energy. Other countries have used different models. We should be doing the same. We need a government that understands the crisis that families are in and that is not willing to dither but rather to act in the interest of people. It can be done just as others have done. Energy and electricity prices can be brought back to where they were pre-crisis and bills reduced by up to €1,300 annually and kept at that level until the end of February. It is time-limited. It is not a blank cheque or any of the sound bites the Government throws out. Instead of grappling with our suggestions that would help people, it tries to dismiss them and brushes them away. On top of that, we also need an excessive profit tax similar to that in Italy. The Minister will be familiar with that. It has increased the rate recently to ensure energy providers are not profiteering through the crisis. The Government could give a commitment to underwrite the difference in the price of electricity charged to households and the cost to the companies of delivering it. Those are two proposals that can work. But we recognise that families and workers are facing many more pressures, including that of heating homes with the price of home heating oil or gas or the increased costs of food and clothing, as well as petrol and diesel

to go from A to B. They are essential costs in this day and age. That is why we need to see the Government go further. We need cost of living cash payments targeted at those who are most in need. Individual incomes for those over 18 years below €21,000 need €500 in their pockets in the next month. We need to see step-down payments for people earning up to €70,000 to help them get through these winter months. Politics is all about choices. The Minister knows that. I know that. These issues are about choices but many people sitting at home who might be tuning in to this debate cannot see the choices. All they see is the rattle of the letter box and another bill which has increased coming through it. They are afraid of the postman or postwoman walking down their lane. It is time for the Government to act. As Deputy Mac Lochlainn observed, the *Financial Times* has pointed out that this Government is the second worst in Europe in relation to its spend as a proportion of GDP in supporting businesses and households during this energy crisis. The Government needs to wake up to what is really happening. It needs to understand the depths of the crisis and where workers and families are at. We are putting on the table the solutions that are needed. These are the policies I would implement were I Minister for Finance and I say to the Minister that these are the policies he and the Green Party should be implementing were they worth their salt in this Government.

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank the Deputies for raising this critical issue and allowing us to have this debate this evening. Clearly, the situation we are witnessing with increases in energy bills and the cost of living is the matter of utmost concern and is central to everything at this time in the country. We are keenly aware of the growing pressure on families and businesses. We have been thinking about and working on this for the past year and a half because this started some year and a half ago for a variety of different reasons. It began with the Russians starting to turn off the gas over a year ago in anticipation of the war. We have been working and talking at length with our European colleagues and other colleagues to get the right policy response. It is affecting every European country. It is the impact of international gas prices going up, on which we are agreed. I heard that for the first time today. For the last year there has been all this debate, confusion in my mind, as to what is the cause of the problem. The cause of the problem is the war in Ukraine; that is putting up the price of gas and that is putting up the price of electricity. Many people have avoided saying that or disagreed with that or doubted it but after this summer, it is as clear as day. Thank God, at last, we know what the problem is. Energy, and with it the inflation that comes from its price increases, is being used as a weapon of war by the Russian Government. It wants the cost of living to divide us, to undermine western democracies and our support for the citizens of Ukraine as part of the war effort. We cannot divide. We have to stand strong and protect our households and businesses as we do so.

As the said Taoiseach today, there is no question. Do we have to intervene? Of course we do. The question is to get the intervention right. We started a year ago. We have been intervening. I want to review some of the measures in my contribution. We will go further in the budget in two weeks. However, I agree with the Taoiseach that we must be careful to respond in the right way. I am afraid that Deputy Doherty does not have the right plan. I do not think the measures he proposes are the optimal but that they may be contradictory and counterproductive. I understand he will come out on Friday and explain the details and not on Friday week, as Deputy Ó Broin said. That will be very useful because it bears really detailed analysis. These are complex markets and interventions. I know very well the French, Spanish and Romanian measures and those of others. We have looked at them in detail with our colleagues and came to our best conclusions. They are not finalised yet because we are still working with the European Commission. However, it seems the combination of measures that Deputy Doherty is propos-

ing will not work well. I wait to hear the finer details because it needs details. We need to do highly complex market interventions. The Deputy needs to that on Friday and not Friday week and I look forward to hearing it.

We do need to introduce a windfall tax on both the electricity market and on fossil fuel companies. That is what we are working with the European Union to do. It is better to do it in a co-ordinated EU way because what Putin wants to do is to divide us and create division and doubt in Europe. So we are working on that. The Commission presented the proposals today. They are so complex that it is necessary to look at each country to see how they might apply. There is flexibility and, in my contribution, I will outline why I think there needs to be flexibility in how we adapt to them. We were very much central to designing, promoting and supporting them in that European Council and also at a further meeting of energy ministers which took place on Sunday and Monday where we again took the opportunity to discuss in detail the right thing to do.

There has been a suggestion that nothing has been done; that is not a true. The €2.4 billion worth of measures that we implemented are important and I think we can learn a lot. We need to understand what they were and what they could be in the upcoming budget. I will set out some of the global market developments behind this. I want to set out the role of the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, CRU. The key thing we need to focus on is protecting our householders. I want to outline what we have done in some of those energy-efficiency and welfare supports. First, it is important to describe what has been happening with prices in the market and to clarify that those energy price increases were not created by the Government or by regulatory decisions. Price regulation in the energy market ended many years ago. Suppliers compete with each other and set their own prices as one would expect in a competitive commercial and liberalised market.

Increases in wholesale energy prices followed a rise in international gas prices, which has been the principal driver of the increases. Some 50% of our electricity comes from gas and it is setting the market price. Those prices started to rise back in 2020 for a variety of reasons, including increasing demand in Asian markets and power generation in Europe switching to gas for different reasons. As I said, early in this process the Russian Government started to switch off gas in the expectation of reducing the stores of gas Europe has in advance of a war. I believe that was done strategically in advance of knowing a war was going to take place to try to weaken the European position. That is why there has been so much focus on gas storage over the summer. We came into this spring and summer with very low European gas stocks because of those actions by the Russian Government.

There was an increase in gas prices earlier in the year but what happened in the last week of July and the first three weeks of August was beyond compare because the markets saw for real that Gazprom was about to switch off the pipe, in particular Nord Stream 1 which supplies so much of Europe. That is why over this summer the scale of the price increase accelerated even further again. That is why we need to respond.

It is a Europe-wide phenomenon. Some countries are more exposed than we are because they are directly connected and have a much higher percentage of Russian gas in their systems. That is why the European Energy Council met in Brussels last Friday. It was an extraordinary emergency meeting to assess what could be done and consider different measures to try to protect consumers across the Continent.

In that meeting, the Commission set out a five-point plan for immediate emergency measures. There was a range of other medium- and long-term measures. However, because of the price increases over the summer we realised that together all of us in Europe needed to act fast now to protect our people.

Serious measures include the capping of revenues. The European proposals include caps, but it is the cap on the revenues of those energy companies making supernormal profits. That is the right cap in my mind. I look forward to hearing Sinn Féin's proposals on an alternative cap that does not give them a blank cheque. In a sense rather than capping the revenues, Sinn Féin would allow it to continue. I would like to see Sinn Féin's further analysis giving the detail on getting that combination together.

The second measure is the introduction of a solidarity levy on the fossil fuel extraction industry. Our primary example of that is Corrib and we need to be appropriate and clever in getting it right in line with European law and so on to ensure we can also participate in that. That is what we have discussed in the Council and since.

The third measure is critical. I have been trying to highlight its real benefit. It is incentivising demand-reduction, particularly at peak times. President Von der Leyen set out the Commission's paper this afternoon. The reason we focus on that peak hour, particularly with larger energy users, is that if demand can be reduced at that time, it brings down the price for everyone. That is a really practical way to help householders and businesses. That last plant at the peak time is the most expensive.

We need to provide liquidity and support mechanisms for energy businesses which are in difficulty and may not be able to pay the advance collateral for householders' bills over the following two months.

I support the proposals for a wider cap on international gas market prices which are completely out of kilter with where they should be. To get that right we need to work with countries such as Japan, South Korea and Norway to ensure it can be effective and work. Europe needs to use its purchasing power to try to protect our householders. That is complex and not easy. The Commissioner asked what the mandate was. In my contribution I said, "Go for that as best you can but it will only work if there is real international co-operation in what we do."

I am sorry I do not have time to set out all the measures. I set them out in my contribution to the Seanad earlier, including everything we are doing with CRU to protect vulnerable householders, all the critical social welfare payments along with the energy credit. I disagree with Sinn Féin; I think we need a credit. This is so significant that it is appropriate to get a payment out to every household. While I accept targeting social welfare at those with the lowest pay and the most vulnerable, I am not sure that cutting out a whole swathe of Irish society from getting that credit is the right response. We need to stay united and protect all our people, but these are unprecedented times.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Households are facing the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation. Ordinary workers and families and indeed small businesses cannot take any more and they certainly cannot face into a winter with bills that continue to skyrocket and could cripple them. Households need long-term solutions to this cost-of-living crisis, not one-off measures which will do nothing to fix the root cause of the problems householders are facing. It is predicted that householders can expect to pay a total of €1,200 for gas and electricity for just two

months in winter. That is scandalous and beyond what many families can manage. How does the Government expect households to cope with this? Arís agus arís eile, feicimid go bhfuil an Rialtas rómhall, uaireanta ar luas seilide.

People are put to the pin of their collar. The scale of the response must match the scale of the crisis. The Government currently lacks the vision and ambition to deliver long-term solutions to this crisis, instead preferring short-term measures as useful as trying to fix a broken leg with a plaster. Analysis by *The Financial Times* found that Ireland has the second weakest response of 24 countries, ahead only of Denmark. While the Government expects households to shoulder excessive prices, companies are allowed to enjoy windfall profits. Tá na réitigh ag Sinn Féin. Tá an fhís agus an dúil againn an ghéarchéim seo a réiteach. Táimid ag moladh laghdú ar chostais leictreachais agus gníomhartha chun iad a choimeád síos.

We need to cut and cap. Sinn Féin proposes reducing electricity prices for households and keeping them at 2021 prices from October until the end of February at €1,000, inclusive of VAT and standing charges. Sinn Féin also proposes income-linked cost-of-living cash payments starting at €500 for low-income families and individual tapered gradually to €100 for those on incomes of up to €70,000, as well as a doubling of child benefit as families use a significant amount of energy.

Sinn Féin has the solutions that will give certainty to households in Cork and throughout the country that they will be able to weather this winter without significant financial hardship. It is high time for the Government to take this on board and offer the relief, certainty and protection that families, workers and businesses need this winter.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Energy price hikes are crippling people throughout the State. Households are facing into the worst cost-of-living crisis in living memory and are getting hammered left, right and centre by ever-rising prices. A clear sign of the Government not understanding the pressure people are under was when the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, recently suggested ways for people to reduce their energy bills, as if they had not been doing that already. The Government dismissed the Opposition's calls for an emergency budget during the summer recess. It ignored the crisis coming down the road and it has made little progress in developing sustainable energy alternatives to move us away from fossil fuels. This motion tonight offers solutions to stop people from having to make hard decisions this winter. Sinn Féin is calling on the Government to reduce energy costs by capping prices based on 2021 figures. We want the Government to introduce targeted measures to assist low and middle income workers and families in a meaningful way with these bills. We want it to pay a double child benefit payment, which recognises the stress that is being put on young families. We need the Government to bring in a windfall tax on the companies that are gouging people across this State. The Government cannot dither and delay any longer. It is time for the Government to wake up and realise how stretched people are. It needs to act in their interests instead of letting costs spiral and people be ripped off by companies seizing an opportunity to make enormous profits. The time for sitting on its hands has long passed. The time for action is now.

Deputy Imelda Munster: As we approach the winter, we are facing into the worst cost-of-living crisis that we can remember for generations. Europeans are facing into a winter of record energy prices, but in Ireland people are contending with energy cost increases on top of what was already an unmanageable cost of living. We have extortionate rents, childcare costs that are equivalent to a second mortgage, and mortgage increases. That is just to mention a few. Energy is only the latest crisis that people in Ireland have to contend with. People were already on the

brink, but this winter they are going to be pushed over the edge.

The Government's response to this crisis has been disgraceful and slow. It has failed to accelerate the development of our own renewable energy resources, which is key to ensuring energy affordability, sustainability and security. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, opposed reform of the wholesale electricity market in October 2021, which would have helped reduce energy costs. The building of new data centres was encouraged all the way, despite repeated warnings about their effect on our energy sustainability and security. On top of all this, the Minister continues to increase carbon taxes. It has been said repeatedly over recent months that people will not be able to heat their homes this winter. People will have to choose between heating their home and feeding their family. It is a crisis situation. The Minister seems to value the protection of the market above everything else, including his own people. His dithering and inaction are going to have serious consequences for ordinary people.

Over the summer, Bord Gáis announced that operating profits rose by 74% in the first part of this year. Frankly, that is disgusting given the current situation. Our Private Members' motion has outlined the measures that we would introduce. If we follow the Government plan and offer only energy credits without capping prices, those credits could be next to worthless if energy companies keep hiking up their prices. It is two weeks to the budget and, like other colleagues, I am asking the Minister to wake up and deal with this crisis in a meaningful way. He should implement our proposals for the sake of workers and families across the State.

Deputy Pa Daly: This motion aims to assist people with their household bills. We need to reduce the costs and put money back in people's pockets. The last straw was the latest round of announcements on electricity prices going up from 27% to 34%. For many, that was the straw that broke the camel's back, in addition to mortgages and back-to-school costs.

I spoke last week with a large employer of 130 employees in County Kerry. He showed me his electricity bills. The difference between January 2019 and January 2020 was a 35% increase. In February it was 36% and in March it was down to 31%, but in April and May it was back up to a 78% and 70% increase, respectively. The manager told me that in his 25 years in the business this is the most uncertain time that he has ever faced going forward. He has no control over costs, and even though he has adopted every cost-saving measure throughout his building, as he is in the hospitality sector, he wants to deliver a service that reflects good things about County Kerry. He needs all the help and support that is available.

We have heard a lot about people in their own homes and the increased costs of €1,000 in their electricity bills. The refusal of the Government to bring forward an emergency budget before the summer recess left people on their own. The refusal of the Minister, acting on behalf of the Government, to reform the electricity market, has already been mentioned. It would have reduced the bills of households and businesses sooner. We need to cut household electricity bills. We must cap them at 2021 prices. We need to introduce cash payments, a double child benefit payment and a windfall tax.

The manager also gave me a list of all the different increases ranging from food prices to his rates bill. We have heard about gougers earlier. The biggest gougers in the country are in the insurance industry. In 2020 and in 2021, in the middle of Covid, his insurance bill was €65,000 and €67,000, but the insurance industry has reared its ugly head again and his insurance bill for the year is €160,000. On top of everything else, there is a real threat that it will put him out of business.

We have tried to introduce measures. The old reliables - the usual suspects - are getting away with it, but they have been joined now. We must act soon - in the budget - to reduce the costs for everyone.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: All of us speak on the motion this evening in the context of what the Minister has rightly described as unprecedented times. In effect, we have a three-pronged crisis - a cost-of-living crisis, an energy crisis and a chronic housing and homelessness crisis. This is framed by the overarching spectre of the climate emergency. It is indeed an unprecedented time. On this side of the House, as well as on the Government benches, we are all conscious that if these crises are not urgently addressed by the Government we are going to see severe hardship visited upon families, households and businesses over the coming bleak winter. We are going to see the poorest households forced to take impossible decisions between heating or eating. We are going to see thousands of working families driven into poverty and debt and we are going to see yet another generation of young adults unable to find or fund secure accommodation and be forced into emigration.

Already, many of us are hearing harrowing stories from people. In my constituency - Dublin Bay South, which is also that of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan - I hear of people faced with eviction and notices to quit, who are devastated at the prospect of trying to find suitable or affordable accommodation anywhere local. We are told by charities about couriers, people who are working and who deliver food to others, but who cannot afford to buy food for themselves. They are turning up for free dinners handed out by the charities. That is simply not acceptable. We hear from small business owners, who are faced with soaring energy bills that are now reaching the level of an additional rent or leasehold. These are extortionate costs that households and businesses are facing, and we need to see concerted and urgent action from the Government on it. That is why we in the Labour Party very much welcome the opportunity tonight to debate the upcoming budget and the package of measures necessary to address this hardship.

I mentioned that yet another generation of young adults is forced to emigrate. I am from a generation that grew up in the 1980s when emigration and unemployment were high. We were facing a 20% unemployment rate and, like now, we were seeing families at their wits end with unaffordable prices for food and fuel. Some things are very different from the 1980s. Now we have what could be described as a paradox of plenty where we have got a successful macro economy. We have Exchequer figures showing a surplus of €6.3 billion for the first eight months of this year alone. We do not have the sort of unemployment figures that we had in the 1980s and that is obviously extremely positive. All the more reason, then, to address the spiralling cost of living because the resources are there. We in the Labour Party have called on the Government to take ambitious, radical and creative measures, to adopt State-led measures of the sort and scale that we saw during the Covid pandemic in order to tackle the hardship that will be faced by so many families, households and businesses but what we are hearing from Government is a lack of urgency. It appears that there is no reassurance forthcoming from Government. We are told to wait and see what the forthcoming budget will contain. People are really fearful now about what is coming down the tracks and yet it appears that in Government Buildings the blinds are down, the shutters are up and obviously the heating is off as we all seek to cut costs on energy.

I am meeting people who tell me that six months or a year ago the incomes they had were sufficient to meet their costs. I am talking about two-income households, about people in what would be considered good jobs who are no longer able to meet costs like the €1,200 monthly

that people are having to pay for childcare and early years education. That is what parents are paying in Dublin Bay South now. People are having to think twice about bringing a child over six years of age to the doctor because each doctor's visit is costly. We know that households are now facing the prospect of energy bills of up to €6,000 per annum next year. These are the sorts of burdens and hardships that have to be addressed. We really need to see very strong and urgent action from the Government.

On the energy crisis, we in the Labour Party have called for a three-pronged approach. We want to see the immediate introduction of a windfall tax on excessive profits in energy companies. I raised this earlier today with the Taoiseach. I very much welcome, as do my Labour Party colleagues, the moves at EU level that the Minister spoke about to devise such a tax. We have also called for a maximum price cap on energy bills and the extension of eligibility for the fuel allowance for low and middle income households. It would cost €15 million to bring 16,000 new households within the eligibility criteria for fuel allowance. That in itself would be a significant way of alleviating hardship for those families. On the windfall tax issue, the Minister mentioned very briefly in his opening remarks the Corrib gas field, which I raised earlier today. The Taoiseach mentioned that we import 75% of our gas but there is a glaring elephant in the room here. The Corrib gas field supplies about one quarter of our gas needs. It is local supply, on this island. Revenues from Corrib increased almost fourfold last year and the company is enjoying another year of bumper profits yet nothing has happened to increase the cost of production or supply of Corrib gas. There is no international competition to boost the price of Corrib gas and yet the price has increased dramatically. That is why I raised with the Taoiseach earlier and raise again now with the Minister the proposal that we look at what powers are available to Government to ensure that the cost of indigenously produced gas can be reduced in order to go some way to meeting the cost of this energy crisis. Clearly this is not a panacea but is just one measure that could be considered. We are proposing that Government would look at existing legislation, including the Fuels (Control of Supplies) Acts 1971 and 1982, which were introduced by previous Fianna Fáil Governments to equip the State with the power to regulate and control the supply and distribution of fuel including gas and invoked previously during the oil shortages in the 1970s. When one looks at that legislation, one sees that there are clear powers there that could be invoked on a temporary basis for the duration of this emergency to ensure that all Irish-produced gas could be sold to the State on a cost-plus basis, in substitution for the current distorted international prices which are not relevant to the market for Corrib gas. We all acknowledge that the market at EU level needs radical change in any case. Indeed, the EU and Ms Ursula von der Leyen have acknowledged that. Just looking at our own supply, though, there is a measure available to Government now because the State could then sell Corrib gas into the Irish market at a reasonable cost-plus price. We have done some creative thinking on this and I urge the Minister to consider this measure.

Clearly there are also many other measures that need to be introduced to alleviate the pressure on households and to ensure that families and individuals can get through the winter ahead. We need to see vastly enhanced environmental initiatives incentivising a rapid switch, nationwide, to renewables. I know the Minister has already brought forward some measures on that but there are some things that could be real win-wins like increasing the grant for solar panels, for example. We should be really encouraging more and more households to invest in and switch to solar power because that will have a double-positive effect of both reducing emissions and tackling household energy bills.

We have also argued in the face of this chronic cost-of-living crisis that Ireland needs a pay

rise and that as a minimum we should see an increase in the minimum wage so it becomes a living wage. That is something that the trade unions have called for and that is clearly necessary. We also need to support small businesses facing the massive hikes we have all heard about in energy bills and basic costs. My colleague Deputy Nash has proposed the introduction of a temporary wage support scheme modelled on the pandemic-era schemes to provide much-needed relief to small and medium enterprises who are struggling with vastly-increased bills.

Of course, in the face of a chronic lack of housing, we need to see massive State investment in a building programme providing public homes on public land and affordable homes for all. We are also asking the Government again to adopt the Labour Party's legislation providing greater protections to renters around security of tenure and against rent hikes, including a freeze on rents for three years. We have also called for a number of emergency measures to address the unprecedented cost-of-living crisis, including a cap on childcare costs to €200 per month because that would bring us into line with the sorts of costs faced by parents in other countries for childcare and early years education. That is the sort of immediate measure that could be brought in and we received some interesting costings from the Exchequer on that. At €270 million a year, it is not an excessive cost when one looks at the difference that investment would make to so many households. We have called for the introduction of a climate ticket, giving people unlimited access to public transport around Ireland for €9 per month. This is the sort of innovative measure we saw introduced in Germany on a pilot basis this year which proved to be so successful. Our costing on that is around €150 million to bring that in for the three months to the end of this year. It would make a dramatic difference to households who are currently facing huge transport costs, would really incentivise a switch to public transport and help us to tackle our climate emissions. We have also called, as we have done for many years, for the immediate extension of free GP care to all children under 18 which can be done for a reasonable sum.

I am conscious that we will have other opportunities to debate the budget. We in the Labour Party will be putting forward a fully costed, alternative budget but the real message tonight is that we must see urgent measures from Government. We are in a situation where we have an Exchequer surplus and we need to see that money invested to help alleviate the hardship that so many families and households face and to address the real and chronic fears that we are hearing about all across the country.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We are in the worst cost-of-living crisis in more than four decades. The price of everything, including basic necessities, is soaring. People all over the country are worrying about how they are going to feed their families and heat their homes. The speed with which prices are increasing and the extortionate levels they are reaching are unprecedented in their scope, scale and catastrophic impact. Even before this crisis, Ireland was the second most expensive country in the EU, with living costs 36% above the EU average. Our housing costs were the highest in the EU. The price of goods and services here were the second highest in the EU and our fuel costs were the fourth highest in the EU.

Today what was a cost-of-living crisis has become a cost-of-survival crisis for a large and growing cohort of our population. We all know what this cost-of-survival crisis looks like. Food costs that are expected to increase by up to €700 per annum. House prices have now exceeded Celtic tiger levels with nowhere near the same recovery for wages. The recent ECB interest rate increase is going to apply even more pressure on already-struggling homeowners. Meanwhile rental costs long ago soared into the stratosphere and are now priced at more than €1,600 per month nationally and an extortionate €2,200 in Dublin. There appears to be no

upper limit when it comes to rental prices despite the Government's failed attempts to curb increases with rent pressure zones that are not fit for purpose. Childcare costs are equivalent to a second mortgage for parents and the notion that we have free education once children progress to school is a bare-faced lie. Parents have to fork out up to €1,500 at this time of year when children go back to school just to provide the basics like uniforms, school books, transport and so-called voluntary contributions which schools demand because the Government does not provide sufficient money for them to heat classrooms and keep them clean. Healthcare costs for services like GP care and therapeutic care are another burden that fall disproportionately on families who have children with additional needs and on adults with disabilities.

8 o'clock

Then, of course, there are the energy costs; the primary reason we are having this debate. Energy prices are now out of control, obliterating the incomes of workers and families and threatening the very survival of businesses. It is not just gas and electricity prices that are soaring. A bag of coal, for example, has increased nearly threefold going from €16 up to €45. The cost of home heating oil, which is used by 40% of households, has doubled to €1,400 for 1,000 l of fuel. The stress, pressure and worry these enormous price shocks are causing the length and breadth of the country are truly extraordinary.

Many workers and families are fearful of the future and they are particularly fearful of this upcoming winter. They simply do not have the money to pay the kinds of extortionate bills that are now mounting up month after month. In June, there was widespread shock when the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, revealed that nearly one third of households were experiencing energy poverty. The previous record high for the number of households in energy poverty was 23%, which was nearly 30 years ago. Following further increases in energy prices, the number of households in energy poverty has now reached 43%, which is nearly half the population. This is almost double the previous high in the 1990s. The worst-case scenario, which does not seem beyond reality now and which was outlined by the ESRI to the Government, was that the number of households in energy poverty could climb to 70%. This would be catastrophic. Therefore, the Government must act now to avoid that worst-case scenario becoming a reality.

It is clear that the energy market is broken and when markets are broken, it is the job of the State to intervene. So, what should happen to ensure that those who desperately need assistance get a sufficient amount in as rapid a way as possible? In a crisis like this, which has the potential to do untold levels of societal and economic damage, every policy approach that could provide relief needs to be carefully considered. Nothing can be discounted. Governments across the EU are dealing with similar crises but in countries like Germany, which recently announced a €65 billion support package, we have seen real tangible action. We will have to see commensurate financial firepower used here to ensure that workers and families are protected from the worst excesses of this crisis.

A core part of our approach and a call of the Social Democrats is for a windfall tax. Energy companies are currently making grossly excessive profits on the backs of ordinary workers and families. The Social Democrats have been calling for the Government to act and introduce a windfall tax for a long time now, and it is unfortunate and regrettable that there has been no action from Government on this. The Government waited until the European Commission finally signalled that a windfall tax was warranted before it began to show any interest in pursuing these companies with any vigour. While it is welcome that the EU is now moving ahead with

a windfall tax, the Government should have already been ready to act to try recoup some of the obscene profits that are being made on the backs of families.

It is grotesque to see the level of amoral profiteering by energy companies that is accompanying a catastrophe like the war in Ukraine which is causing so much loss of life and destruction. The introduction of a windfall tax must be prioritised and these companies must be pursued. While the windfall profits of energy companies are taxed, the companies whose very survival is threatened by this crisis must be supported by the Government. This will not only protect individual businesses; it will protect the economy ensuring that when this crisis subsides, the economy can bounce back.

We need an energy crisis support scheme using the template provided by the Covid-19 support schemes to ensure that businesses and jobs are protected. Targeted supports for workers that are graduated based on income levels must also be part of the solution. When the Government first announced its €200 electricity credit in December 2021, it said that it was opting for a universal measure. That was against the advice of experts like the ESRI and the Central Bank of Ireland. The Government said it was because it would help it get that money and support to families quickly. We know that was not case, however. It took up to six months for that money and that credit to actually land in people's accounts.

There is no excuse for the Government having sat on its hands for the past year and fail to devise a way to target these payments where they are needed most, which is at low and middle-income earners. Deputies in this Chamber and other high-income earners do not need the same level of support as those on low and middle incomes. I think that is something on which we should all be able to agree within this Chamber. Why then is it proposed that we would receive the same level of support as those on a minimum wage? Why would that credit go to all of us and not be targeted?

It is astonishing that nearly a year after the first energy credit was announced, the Government still has not figured out a way to target those payments to those who need the support most. Spreading resources too thinly will inevitably mean that those on the margins who are struggling to keep their heads above water will be plunged into poverty. A failure to plan is a recurring theme with this Government, or perhaps I should say that plans do not ever seem to get beyond the publication of a new strategy document. The climate action plan is a case in point. The Government prides itself on its alleged environmental credentials but the evidence does not support the sloganeering. The reality is that our emissions are going up while retrofitting targets are looking increasingly fantastical. The waiting list for retrofitting for those most at risk of fuel poverty on the warmer homes scheme is now more than two years. The low-interest loan for retrofitting, which was promised in the spring, still has not materialised and now the Minister is flying kites with regard to banning gas boilers from 2025 despite the fact that those homes need a building energy rating, BER, of at least 2B to get a Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grant for a heat pump. What planet is this Government on? We need the Minister's climate action to catch up with his climate rhetoric.

We have no idea how long this energy crisis will last but it could be very prolonged. Therefore, we need to massively scale up our renewable energy production, our grid capacity and our retrofitting plans. This does not just mean publishing glossy plans and posing for pictures on bikes. It means resourcing schemes adequately, enabling offshore wind generation and meeting targets instead of missing them. This country's antiquated energy infrastructure and its woeful inability to plan for its future energy needs is the fault of successive Governments, all of which

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have been led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. This is not a political attack; it is a political fact. That failure to plan and invest is now exacerbating an energy crisis that is causing untold levels of damage. The Government must act now, first with emergency and targeted measures to put out the flames of the cost-of-living inferno and then to actually deliver on the climate action plan.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after “not made during the period of the crisis”:

“— examine the measures needed to develop a wholly publicly owned and not-for-profit energy system, including the nationalisation of all existing energy generation in the State in order to fully address both the current energy crisis and the climate crisis”

I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion on the cost of living and for giving us an opportunity to discuss what is a really dire crisis. This People Before Profit amendment is simply an addition to the Sinn Féin motion. We agree with all the proposals Sinn Féin has put forward. We are adding an amendment suggesting that we must look as a matter of urgency at the question of taking the energy production and supply sector in this country into public ownership and running it on a not-for-profits basis to address the immediate crisis we are facing but also to have a sustainable situation in terms of providing the energy we need for our people to live, for our society and, indeed, to tackle the climate emergency we face. We think the time has come when we must look at doing that.

I want people to dwell a little bit on the term “cost of living”. If we think about the term “cost of living”, it is an absolutely disgusting phrase. Think about it - there is a price tag attached to living. There are companies who make money by giving or not giving people the things they need to live. It is considered acceptable that private for-profit corporations control those things people need to live and have the power not to give them to people or charge so much for them that people cannot afford them. These are things that people need to live. This is not discretionary spending like popping off somewhere for a holiday or going to a very expensive restaurant, but things people need to live. There is a cost to it and a price tag and there are people who profit precisely from the fact that a person may not be able to afford those things or that there is a shortage in the supply. That is obscene, but it is the reality of the cost-of-living crisis. Hundreds of thousands of families, pensioners, students, working people and people with disabilities are fearful that they will not be able to afford the cost of those things that people need to live this winter - heating their homes, providing hot water, putting food on the table, paying their bills and paying their rent. What a terrifying prospect, yet at the same time, the companies that provide the things and own the resources that people need to live are enjoying a bonanza in profits. It is immoral and obscene that that could be the case, that the shareholders of those companies are enjoying a bonanza and people are sitting back who have done nothing yet are seeing their wealth and profits increasing while other people are scared, suffering and enduring real hardship.

This is not just true of energy, but also of the housing crisis. A man in his mid-70s came to me this week. He had worked all his life in construction - he had been a project manager - and had built many of this city’s large shopping centres. He broke down in tears in front of me. He is 76 years of age and he just broke down in tears because his landlady was selling the place where he had lived for years. He has never been on the housing list, so he has no chance of getting social housing. He will go on the list, but he does not have even the remotest prospect

of getting somewhere to live and there is nowhere for him to rent. As he cried in my office, he told me that he had paid his taxes and worked all his life and had never asked for anything but was now facing the prospect of homelessness. He asked me what he was supposed to do. This is the type of suffering that people are enduring.

It is not morally acceptable that old people, people with disabilities and families with children will turn off their heating this winter when they need it, will not have money to pay their bills and will cut back on food. The State has the resources, and the companies which are generating significant profits, have the money to sort out this crisis and shield people from it if there is a willingness on the part of the Government to use those resources and redistribute the profits that are being made in order to protect those who are suffering. It is entirely a political choice of the Government to protect either the interests of ordinary people or the interests of large corporations.

I will make a brief proposal. With all the money the Government has, it should buy up some of the empty properties that are being constructed at the moment. Either investment funds buy them or we use our money to buy them in order to deliver affordable and public housing at scale quickly. If we use that extra money to do so, we will make a serious dent in the housing crisis. This is a serious proposal. The Government is saying that it has all of this extra money but that it cannot depend on that money in future years. That is a fair point, but it is worth saying that corporate tax receipts are due to increase from €15 billion to €20 billion this year. That means that there has been an increase of approximately 33% in the corporate sector's profits this year. That is staggering. We should deliver public housing by using that money to buy up all of the property that is being constructed and will otherwise be bought by international investment funds. We could deliver thousands of additional public housing units. Where anyone is threatened with eviction from a housing assistance payment, HAP, or rental accommodation scheme, RAS, tenancy, let us buy the house immediately, prevent people from being put on the street and save the State money in the long term.

Deputy Mick Barry: We are debating measures that need to be introduced to assist people with household bills. The clearest and simplest step that can be taken is to increase welfare benefits and pay to rates that match inflation. However, this would go directly against the policy of the Government. The Government effectively wants to cut workers' pay, including the pay of the lowest paid workers. The increase in the minimum wage is below 8% and the rate of inflation. The Government cut the minimum wage last year and is planning to cut it again next year.

The Government's policy is also effectively to cut the pay of 300,000 public sector workers, among them the heroes and heroines of the pandemic, including our nurses and other health service workers. A pay increase of 6.5% was negotiated by the Government. However, given the rate of inflation, that is clearly a pay cut. Inflation is currently in or around 9%, which does not even account for the large hikes in gas and electricity prices that are to happen on 1 October. I appeal to those public sector workers who have a vote on this issue to vote "No" and reject the Government's pay offer, which is in reality a pay cut. I appeal to working people and trade unionists not to vote for a cut in their pay.

This raises the question of what the alternative is. The president of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, and general secretary of Fórsa, Mr. Kevin Callinan, stated when the negotiations concluded that it was the best deal that could be got on the basis of negotiation. What this implies is that, if a better deal is to be got, there will have to be a struggle in order to get it. That is correct. Vote "No" and get the unions to ballot for industrial action. Some 300,000

public sector workers have the power to face down the Government. Cost-of-living protests are taking place this month and will continue through the winter. If the unions put their power and influence behind those demonstrations and mobilise as many of their members as possible, those demonstrations could put the Government under considerable pressure.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies Fitzpatrick and Shanahan of the Regional Group are sharing time.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: We will have five minutes each. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue of major concern to people. The spiralling cost of living is a hot topic in every household. Ireland is one of the most expensive places in Europe to live, with prices 40% higher than the EU average. With prices skyrocketing at rates not seen for four decades, people are lying awake at night concerned about how they are going to survive the winter. My office is receiving high volumes of calls from constituents who are genuinely terrified. They are already extremely financially restrained and simply do not know from where the extra money is going to come. For example, new figures have revealed that the cost of living is more than €4,000 per month for a family with two children. That is unsustainable.

The Government needs to get on top of this situation now, as the current measures that have been introduced are not enough. For example, the introduction of free school transport has not worked. On the contrary, many students have been left without transport, which is an added worry for parents who, for the past number of years, have relied on this form of transport to allow them to get to work on time. It was acknowledged by the Tánaiste this week that free school transport was a mistake, given how it is overprescribed. The Taoiseach disagreed with this statement at the talk-in this week, positing that the long-term embedding of behavioural changes could counteract the impact of this failing, but these behavioural changes will not help the affected families now. What are we going to do about this situation now?

The cycle to work scheme is a great initiative, but only if one is living in close proximity to work or college. Therefore, travel costs for commuters to work and college must be reviewed, especially for rural Ireland. Spain has recently implemented measures offering free travel on state-owned suburban and regional public transport from 1 September to 31 December 2022, thanks to a windfall tax. Germany introduced a nationwide ticket costing €9 a month, offering unlimited travel on most public transport, apart from express intercity trains. Such initiatives will provide relief to commuter costs amid this cost-of-living crisis. I urge the Government to consider implementing similar in Ireland as soon as possible.

The fuel allowance payment is a great payment which helps many people. However, it is a means-tested payment. Recently, I had a constituent being refused due to being €6 over the income threshold. As the fuel allowance payment is €33, this €6, which is less than one hour's work, has cost this lady €27 per week. Due to the rise in the cost of living, the means assessment qualification must also rise. Instead of raising the monetary allowance granted for fuel allowance, I suggest an increase in the means assessment so it can benefit more people who badly need this assistance. For example, middle-income workers, like my constituent, are constantly missing out on allowances such as the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance due to being slightly over the means test.

We also need to look at the combined housing costs such as rents, mortgage rates, gas and electricity, which are the most expensive at 89% above the EU average. While the Government's ten-year housing plan may bring relief in the long term, more immediate action is

needed to relieve the burden on renters, with many people paying more in rent than they would if they had a mortgage. Also, many students are at breaking point amidst the accommodation crisis, choosing to stay in hostels or sleep in cars or even tents rather than face a long commute each day. This is not good enough, especially leading into colder weather. Although a rent-a-room scheme could prove successful, the sharp increase in rents throughout the country reflects a worsening of the unprecedented scarcity of rental homes. The latest figures from *daft.ie* showcase that the cost of renting in Louth has risen by over 8% in the past year, with average rents now at €1,420. Because Louth is located along the commuter belt, my office has received numerous calls from students near and far from across Ireland in search for accommodation for the upcoming year. This includes students who are hoping to study in Dublin. If they have to commute, they may as well locate themselves closer to their chosen college, in places such as Dundalk and Drogheda.

Additionally, many of my constituents who have been working from home since the pandemic are weighing up their options coming into winter. Many consider it more-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: -----costly to work from home with the price of heat and gas on the rise, as well as rising electricity and Wi-Fi costs.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have to interrupt the Deputy because there are three speakers.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: Over the space of 12 months, there has been a €1,000 increase in annual household gas and electricity bills, with some commentators suggesting this could end up reaching up to €6,000 per annum. This is unsustainable for households and domestic businesses. I know of business owners who are paying up to €100,000 per year in gas and energy bills and who are now facing tariffs that would bring that cost up to €360,000 per year. The economic and the social fallout for families and businesses will be staggering without immediate and significant market interventions. We also need to demonstrate our ability to accelerate capital power development projects that we have been virtue signalling now for some time.

Earlier today in the Dáil, the Taoiseach said he expects that this crisis could extend up to a further 18 months and possibly beyond. There is no doubt the climate policy we have adopted, although laudable, is coming back to hurt us. Carbon taxes and the removal of indigenous energy production are having a significant effect on our ability to meet this crisis. Today, I also heard the Taoiseach reference our position that we would like to remain with what European solidarity will propose, but we ourselves have to be proactive. To that point, I will raise some issues that will probably come up in our Regional Group's motion tomorrow.

Can we consider banning the threat of any electricity supply discontinuation to domestic or commercial customers during this crisis, particularly to hospitals, homes, schools and nursing homes? We should suspend the licensing regime that is in place for forestry thinning. This is dysfunctional at the moment. Using those thinnings and brash, we could reopen the 250 MW midlands power stations in Lanesborough and Shannonbridge to burn biomass. This is eminently feasible and just requires policy legislation. We could also set a national cap on the unit price of electricity within the State, raising a long-term loan to pay for verifiable surplus cost to power generators, which would be repaid through electricity bills over a 15-year period. We have seen this being enacted in other countries in the EU. Furthermore, we could exempt

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planning for rooftop flush mounted solar PV panels on domestic, agricultural and commercial buildings. I am sure it is not lost on the Minister that the Irish Farmers' Association, IFA, is across the road tonight, having with met the Minister today. That is a policy we signalled two years ago and we have yet to implement it.

As the Minister knows well, we are in a crisis, as are families and businesses. We need to act proactively to protect the vulnerable, but we also must consider the livelihoods of our citizens and our business owners.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: If there was ever a crisis that highlighted the chasm between the pressure people are under and the lack of Government action, this is the crisis. Though this issue has been ramping up week after week since before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and at least since the start of the year, week by week, families are being squeezed dry of their money. Whole sections of our population are now falling into food poverty. Some 47% of the State is in energy poverty at the moment. It is outstanding that such a section of society would be dealing with such energy poverty. We have the ability to pay for energy, accommodation, food and necessities such as those, but this is slipping through the fingers of even middle-income families under the Minister's Government.

The most frustrating element of all of this has been the apathy and the unwillingness of the Minister's Government to change and take action. If I were to give a sentence summing up what the attitude of the Minister's party has been, it is *laissez-faire*. Let the people look after themselves in this. It is mortifying that the Tories in London have committed to a windfall tax for energy companies before the Minister's Government has even considered the issue at all. Green Party ideology is at the heart of this problem. We are the only country in Europe that does not have a gas reserve at a time when gas supply and gas prices are at the heart of this issue.

Incompetence is also at the heart of this issue. Just this week, Irish people have been able to draw down payment tariffs for the microgeneration of electricity in terms of small-scale wind, small-scale solar and bio-digestion. This is being done ten years after the Six Counties have done so and we are the last country in Europe to be able to do that. Just this week, I listened to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, speak in measured tones about the seriousness of offshore wind energy as all the Ministers gathered around from all over Europe. Twenty years have gone by and seven offshore wind turbines have been built off the coast of Ireland. That is incompetence on a grand scale. The Minister refused to reduce the VAT on fuel, citing that the European Union will not allow it, yet Spain has already achieved this and has reduced the VAT on fuel. The Government is still allowing for carbon tax to increase year after year. It is unforgivable that the Government is increasing carbon tax when people are suffering so much. The Government has refused to decouple the price of non-gas generated electricity from gas-generated electricity.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Again, it points the finger at the European Union on this issue. However, Spain and Portugal-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----have managed to get a dispensation in this and they are carrying on. The Government's attitude reminds me of Homer Simpson when he ran for mayor under the slogan, "Can't somebody else do it?"

Deputy Carol Nolan: We can safely say that the only temperature that will be rising over the winter months is the temperature of ordinary people's anger and frustration. That anger has already reached boiling point in many locations throughout the world as people see the collapse in access to affordable heating and energy supplies. Gas and electricity prices are fast reaching the stage of becoming the equivalent of a second mortgage payment. Social housing tenants are living in dread of not being able to pay their rent. Older people are being terrified into darkness and cold because of the sheer and utter largely imposed crisis that our own energy policies have created.

The forced march towards reliance on renewable sources of energy without a proper system of alternatives being in place represents to my mind one of the most despicable acts of political negligence and contempt I have ever witnessed towards the lives and businesses of ordinary people. Energy suppliers are leaving the market due to unsustainable costs. We saw, only yesterday, the announcement by Panda Power that it will be exiting the Irish market, the fourth supplier to do so. This will lump tens of thousands of customers onto higher tariffs at a time of already exorbitant costs. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications has been going around like some kind of political ostrich, with his head in the sand. The Greens, with their spineless allies in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, put their hands to their ears like little children, when everyone with an ounce of cop-on and objectivity was pointing out the sheer stupidity of the current approach to energy policy. All three Government parties, through recklessness and mismanagement, have condemned our people to a drop in living standards not seen in 40 years. Government Members should hang their heads in shame.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: If members of this Government, including the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, were in any other jurisdiction, they would be tried for high treason. The first thing the Government did was to close down Bord na Móna. The price of electricity has gone up every day since. Everyone driving on the roads is being robbed by the tax content in the cost of fuel. Four energy providers have left the market this week. There will be no competition and ESB bills are going to be dearer. It looks like 150 social houses in County Kerry will remain vacant because there is no funding for voids to turn them around because the Minister wants them to be retrofitted to the highest standard. There are 150 houses vacant. The former Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, stopped the drilling in 2019. The gas fields of Kerry, the Corrib and Kinsale could be probed further. Some 200 million barrels of gas and oil could be drilled out of Barryroe. The Government pays no heed to that. It refused, point blank, planning permission for Shannon LNG and the Minister is against it. That is criminal. People on the road are paying the amount of tax they are paying and then the Minister suggests that one car would do everyone in a village. Yet, he and his party members and Ministers fly first class and peer down on the lot of us. That is what this Government is about. If it were any other jurisdiction, its members would be tried for high treason because the people in the country are highly regarded.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The reality of the crazy decisions that this Government has taken is hitting home with people now. With the whole energy issue we have, the fact is that people are facing a winter where a bag of coal could possibly cost €45 or maybe even €50. The Government should not be telling people to go and retrofit their homes. These people do not have €20,000, €30,000 or €40,000 underneath the bed to produce before they can avail of the grant that is being provided. There is a craziness to what the Government has done. I have heard people today, for example, in the Labour Party, giving out about the cost of living when they are after blindly voting for carbon taxes. To be honest, there were people around this Chamber who

said the Government was not going far enough, fast enough. Where are they now? What are they going to tell the people in their constituencies? They all voted for increased taxes. Now is the time that there should be no increased taxes because people need to pay their ESB bills to keep the lights on. There are disabled, vulnerable and older people who are really fearful now of the bills that are coming in the post. They cannot afford to fill oil tanks because of the cost. They are worried about the price. Even a drum of gas to work a gas cooker is expensive. These people are really struggling. The Government and those who support it and have supported it, including Opposition Members, have done this. We cannot let them be forgotten about because they blindly supported the Government. It is crazy.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Businesses trying to build an enterprise on green energy are having obstacles put in their way. I understand that it is proposed in a Bill on Committee Stage to introduce planning regulations that will allow 60 kW of solar panel power generation. That is not sustainable for any business because any business needs 100 kW of solar panel power. Any house that was built in the 1980s and 1990s would have run on 12 kW of energy. Any house built from the 2000s onwards with heat pumps and geothermal heating needs 16 kW of energy. Yet, businesses are being capped at producing 6.5 kW if they want to help, even though they can produce 20 kW to help and give more back to the grid. The Government has regulated that 6.5 kW is the maximum they can produce. That is not going to help in the case of people trying to ensure there is renewable energy for somebody else. It is an absolute joke what the Government is doing to the people of Ireland at a time of crisis with electricity bills.

Deputy Michael Collins: The crisis this country finds itself in is mainly down to bad Government decisions. The Government has gone to lengths to blame everyone but itself through this recession. The Rural Independent Group has been warning of this shocking recession coming. Instead of taking fast action, the Government has thrown gallons of petrol on the fire. The carbon tax that was heaped on the people of Ireland was completely supported by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Green Party, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, the Social Democrats and the usual nod-and-wink Independents. We pleaded with the Government not to go ahead with that tax, as people could not afford to pay the extra to fill the home heating oil tank. They could not afford to pay the extra for the diesel and the petrol. All the same parties that are whingeing and crying now did not give a damn. They crucified the ordinary people to get cash to pay for pet projects around our capital.

In my constituency in west Cork, I have met shop owners, including the owners of Centra and SuperValu stores. I have met representatives of the hotel, farming and fishing sectors. Many more businesses and people in west Cork have turned to me as they know I was the only Deputy in west Cork who spoke of a crisis when all others were in favour of crucifying the people further. This recession makes all previous recessions look like a holiday. It saddens me to see that this Government is totally inactive. Instead of finding quick and fast solutions, such as cutting the tax take on fuel and taking on energy companies making mass profits, it is kicking solutions down the road. Instead of helping in a time of crisis, it is boasting about huge tax takes but is not giving anyone hope of getting anything major back.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmaid? Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan an páirtí Glas? This is unbelievable and bizarre. The Government is literally trying to starve and perish the people with its policies. I actually believe that now. Kindergarten children would not do what the Government has done. It shut down the plants and power supplies and then tried to say we have no ESB. EirGrid told our group 15 months ago that there was a threat. The Taoiseach, after his meandering around Béal na Blath, came up and said the Gov-

ernment would set up an investigation. He will go down in history for setting up more investigations and inquiries, and whatever else, to see why we did not know about the energy crisis. This is part of the global world. On the 21st of this month there is another big global meeting. I am sure the Minister for Foreign Affairs and others will be attending as our representatives. To hell with the people. It is all a power grab. The Government does not care about the people. I used to talk about the little people and the poorer people, but it is all of the people of our country now. We are supposed to have a sovereign government here. All that is bothering it every day is Ukraine and Europe. To hell with our people. To hell or to Connacht is back again in style.

We cannot keep up with the price increases. Many energy companies have left the market. Here we are rubbing our hands today. Parties voted for more carbon tax and full carbon tax. Now they are whingeing. They cannot have it both ways. If they vote for these issues and for their pet projects, they see where it ends up. We should open up Barryroe again. We should get Shannon LNG going again and reactivate our peat plants. Imagine, the peat plant in Lanesborough was dismantled and is now functioning in Poland. We are importing peat from Poland and other countries. As I said, the white coat men should come along and pick up a few of the people here who are making these policies.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak on this very pressing issue. I completely support this motion to introduce measures to assist with household bills. It has been a difficult summer for many households across this country and I know that many in County Donegal have been struggling to keep up with the never-ending rise in household bills. What I have found extremely alarming is the level of anxiety among my constituents. There is a strong sense of fear of this coming winter and sheer panic at the thought of trying to make ends meet. Surely, when met with such anxiety among the citizens, the Government should recognise its own failure. This is a failure to protect households and a failure to provide any type of comfort to those worrying endlessly about what is to come.

We should have had an emergency budget by now but instead we have let people face the full impact of rising prices alone. We read stories every day of people having to choose between heating and eating, yet the Government still seems completely detached from this reality. RTÉ aired a devastating documentary on Monday night entitled “Broke” and I implore everyone to give it a watch to see what is happening on the ground. The documentary told of Ireland’s cost of living and the incredible wave of emigration that has been seen in recent months. A business in my home town of Killybegs featured and the business owners told the story of how their popular restaurant was forced into closure. The customers of the restaurant are experiencing huge increases in costs as well as the business itself. That is the problem and that has not been recognised at any stage by the Government. It is time to start listening to the people. Where has the clock gone? Will we keep on going? There is no time left.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There is no power to run it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The two and a half minutes are up.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: They are up; I should have said nothing.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: First, on the voucher the Government gives out for electricity, I hope that this time people who live over their premises get the rebate back because the last time they did not. Second, if the Minister of State wants solutions, I have a suggestion. In six to seven weeks, Lanesborough and Shannonbridge power stations can burn biomass. We are

exporting biomass because we have no place to use it and we could use it there. I have talked to people in the ESB and they said it is no problem and it would take six to seven weeks to get it up and running. I mention Derrybrien wind farm. Here we are saying that the EU said this, that and the other. Is the EU our master now or are we going to leave people cold and in the dark? The reason this has happened is bad policy from the EU down through the years. What has happened in this market is the ESB was here one time and because of EU law it had to be broken up, no more than Bord Gáis is being broken up at the moment. Now the EU is finally seeing that it was a mistake that this was done through the years. If the ESB was in total control of our energy and was able to put the money into it then it would not have us in the mess we are in at the moment.

I want to hear the plan the Government has going forward because I heard that the emergency task force has met. From what I have heard there does not seem to be a plan going forward. The one thing that needs to happen is that if the data centres are knocked off first, heavy industry is protected and we must make sure that the ordinary people are provided for. To be frank about it, if we run through any more problems or people worrying in this country, we will need to bring a motion to the Dáil on the Minister and the position he has taken. The lights could go out in this country and it cannot be tolerated. We are running a risk with the agenda we are following. Whatever madness has gone on during the past two or three years between Europe and politicians in Ireland means we will run short of food, heat and electricity.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The motion condemns the dithering by the Government, despite the urgency of the cost-of-living crisis. This statement is true because compared with our EU counterparts the Government has not responded in a proportionate way up to now. The *Financial Times* analysis, which covered September 2021 to August 2022, examined the funding allocated to households and businesses to shield them from the cost-of-living crisis as a percentage of GDP. Greece was top of the list at approximately 4.6%; Italy was at 3%; France at 1.8%; the UK at 1.5%; and Ireland at 0.25%. That tells its own tale. I acknowledge we are expecting a significant increase in budget expenditure but up to now we are way behind and budget day will have to deliver a budget bazooka to deliver the package that households and businesses need because the bills of so many small businesses, service providers, farmers and families are out of control at this stage. This evening, as we debate in this House, many are struggling to pay previous bills and the thought of what is facing them in the coming weeks and months is paralysing many. We needed an emergency budget before the summer recess. The cost-of-living crisis is not starting in budget week for my constituents in counties Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon or Donegal. It started nine months ago, and while I wait to hear about the specific Government actions, many families, households and businesses are struggling badly.

I fully support the call for a windfall tax. Some companies are making obscene profits on the backs of struggling families. Their businesses will flourish, while SMEs, delicatessens, small service providers and restaurants will close their doors and farmers will be unable to pay their bills. We should have moved much earlier, like other EU member states did. When the operating profits of Bord Gáis Energy grew by 74% in the first half of this year while the ESB, Energia and SSE Airtricity will see their income from wind energy increase sixfold, it is reasonable to say we are late to this table. In any suite of measures we need to see a substantial increase in the income threshold eligibility for fuel allowance, a significant increase in fuel allowance and much broader eligibility scope for carers and all those with disabilities.

Deputy Joan Collins: I support the motion. We are two weeks away from the 2023 budget and promised measures to alleviate the cost-of-living crisis. Like most responses from this

Government I expect it will be too little, and it will certainly be too late. We should have had a mini-budget in the early summer. This is not just a crisis in heating and lighting for people and it is not a crisis confined to the winter months. People have been suffering from the cost of living over the summer months and what is kicking in now is that energy costs will cripple people, as well as the cost of their food shops. It is also a crisis in rent and rising food prices, especially staples, with a 10% increase in inflation in the past year. That means those on starting incomes will get a 10% cut and it will be higher for those on low wages or welfare, who spend one quarter of their incomes just meeting their basic needs. Today we had the announcement of an 80 cent increase in the hourly rate of the minimum wage, bringing it to €11.30. This is well below the median rate, which is probably closer to €14 per hour. It also does not equate to a basic weekly wage, given that large numbers of part-time workers often only work for 15 to 20 hours per week. The trade union movement should be coming out strongly for a €15 per hour minimum wage, linked to a major recruitment campaign, not just to sign up workers but to organise workers in the workplace to fight to end the scandal of low pay.

On the question of energy prices, there are mixed messages coming from the Government, with the Minister saying the Government prefers a credit and Deputy Coveney on the radio this morning not ruling out a cap in prices. The reality is that we need both, as the motion calls for, a cap set at June 2021, alongside targeted measures for those most in need. No one in this Chamber needs a targeted measure, and certainly not one in the order of €600. The price of energy was capped in France, Spain and Portugal and it has benefited the people there. The inflation rate is just below 6% in France compared with ours. It also stops companies from pushing up prices and gouging people because it is easy to see who is doing that. I also support a publicly-owned and not-for-profit energy system, including the nationalisation of all existing energy generation in the State to address the energy and climate crises.

A mass protest took place in Cork on 17 September leading to one in Dublin next Saturday, 24 September. These have been organised by the Cost of Living Coalition, which includes a wide range of groups representing pensioners students trade unions left parties and mica protesters. I will be on that protest and I encourage people to come out in their tens of thousands to demand the action that is needed to confront this crisis.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I apologise to Deputy Pringle that I cut him short. I deprived him of vital speaking time.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle will have to make it up to me.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I welcome the debate and I thank colleagues from all sides for their contributions. This is clearly the main item of interest and concern to Irish people, who are facing unprecedented wholesale gas prices, which directly impacts electricity and gas prices in our homes. We know that over the coming winter we will face higher energy costs, as continued price rises take effect. As I previously outlined, the Government has taken action in 2022 in response to rising energy prices and has put in place a €2.4 billion package of policies to support consumers. The Government is aware that this is not enough and further action will be needed. In April and May, 99% of domestic energy accounts were credited with the electricity costs emergency benefit payment. The total cost of the scheme was just under €377 million. This was of benefit to an extraordinary number of households and is in addition to increased funding for supports such as the fuel allowance and funding to reduce VAT on gas and electricity bills and excise duty on petrol and diesel, making a total allocation of €267 million. Of that, €202

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million was taken from carbon tax receipts. That money was sent to the SEAI for residential and community retrofit schemes in 2022.

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has published a review of the strategy to combat energy poverty. A new action plan will set out measures for this winter, as well as longer term measures, and will be published shortly after the budget. A cross-departmental steering group chaired by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has been established and is developing the new action plan. My Department has also been engaging with relevant Departments and agencies on a bilateral basis. This process is running in parallel to the Estimates. The group will also work with the ESRI and the CSO as a research network to improve the measurement and monitoring of energy poverty in Ireland and to provide insights that enhance policy design to protect vulnerable households and ensure supports are targeted towards those most in need.

In relation to Government policy in this area, I emphasise that electricity and gas markets are commercial, competitive and in line with EU policy. They result in greater choice for consumers and businesses in terms of suppliers, products and prices. The position of successive governments for almost 20 years has been that competitive energy markets result in greater choice for consumers and businesses in terms of suppliers, products and prices, and support competition to drive down prices. Within this overall competitive framework, the best long-term policy is to support households with their energy costs through energy-efficiency measures to provide sustainable and long-term protection against energy poverty, to continue with the development of indigenous renewable electricity and to enable Ireland to reach EU renewable energy targets and our own national energy and climate target of delivering at least 80% of renewable electricity by 2030.

We need to promote further electricity interconnection, both to the EU and the UK, and further integrate with the EU internal energy market. In pursuing our objectives of decarbonisation, we need to support those who are vulnerable. Our collective efforts have led, for example, to date in 2022, to over 2,350 free upgrades being provided to homes at risk of energy poverty through the SEAI's warmer homes and warmth and well-being schemes.

The renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, has already begun delivering sustainable and cost-effective indigenous renewable electricity projects. Projects under the first RESS auction are expected to contribute an increase of approximately 15% to our renewable energy generation capacity by the end of 2023, while projects under RESS 2 are expected to deliver an additional increase of nearly 20% to our renewable energy generation by the end of 2025. To date, RESS 1 has seen 353 MW of new renewables connected to the grid, pushing grid-connected renewables to approximately 5 GW. This year will be a record year for the connection of new renewables. About 700 MW will be added, consisting of RESS and non-RESS additions, with over 400 MW more expected to be delivered by RESS 1 next year and close to 2 GW expected from RESS 2 projects between 2024 and 2025. We have had a record year this year and expect another next year. The nature of the RESS auctions means that renewable generators partaking in them pay back to electricity customers when electricity market prices are high. The CRU calculated that RESS 1 projects are expected to return €313 million to consumers through the public service obligation levy over 2022 and 2023.

Further electricity interconnection connecting our grid to the UK and France is under way, improving energy security and allowing us to export great amounts of electricity during high wind generation periods.

As I have outlined, in August under response 6 of the national energy security framework and following engagement with customer representative groups, energy suppliers and network operators, the CRU announced enhanced consumer protection measures including an extension to moratoriums on disconnections, better value for those on financial hardship meters and promotion of a vulnerable customer register.

I will outline the Government's commitment to helping households with their energy costs, particularly low income households and those in danger of energy poverty. I have already provided detail on the various welfare allowances, which include the fuel allowance, the living alone allowance and the household benefits package. The Government is acutely aware of the impact on households of increasing energy costs. The Government's primary response is to increase funding for the social welfare system to counter rising costs of living, of which energy costs are one of the biggest drivers. To address this directly, budget 2022 increased the weekly rate of the fuel allowance. Throughout 2022, the Government has responded to rising energy prices with further increases to that allowance.

The Department of Social Protection also pays an electricity or gas allowance under the household benefits scheme. The household benefits package is separate from the fuel allowance scheme and a further €203 million will be spent on the scheme in 2022. Over 483,000 households will benefit from this to assist with their household bills, including gas and electricity bills. The gas and electricity element is paid at a rate of €35 per month, 12 months of the year. Targeted supports provided under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, the exceptional needs payment and the urgent needs payment may be made to help to meet an essential, once-off cost which an applicant is unable to meet out of his or her own resources. In addition, under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, a special heating supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances who have special heating needs.

I reiterate that there are supports in place to assist with household and business energy costs and mechanisms are there which can be used to provide further assistance. Moreover, our regulatory framework underpins a competitive market in which consumers can make considerable savings. That framework also provides protections to consumers via the energy regulator, the CRU. As set out in the amendment, the Government has already put a €2.4 billion package of measures in place to support people to meet the cost of energy. It continues to monitor this unprecedented and evolving situation closely to inform ongoing consideration of further action, particularly in the context of the imminent budget 2023. I welcome this debate and thank all Deputies for their contributions.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. To respond, Deputy Ellis, sharing with his colleagues.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It has come as a huge shock to those in my constituency of Dublin North-West who depend on domestic fuel oil to see that domestic fuel costs in Dublin, which averaged around 68 cents per litre just last year, have since increased to a staggering €1.32 per litre, having reached a peak in May of almost €1.76 per litre. It costs €1,300, on average, to fill a tank. How long the fill would last depends on usage. A poorly insulated house uses more fuel. Larger families use more fuel as well. A full tank might only last a couple of months before a second fill is needed in order to get through the remainder of the winter. This is beyond the means of many pensioners and low income families. Many are being forced to choose between putting aside what little money they have to heat their homes and putting food on the table.

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Everything is rising in cost. Electricity and gas suppliers and fuel companies have put up their prices on a number of occasions over the past year. A situation is developing where vulnerable old people will try to save money on energy costs by not always heating their home and putting themselves at risk of hypothermia. We cannot put the elderly or families at risk of fuel poverty.

Energy companies are making exceptional profits in these times of crisis. Bord Gáis, for example, has seen its profits surge by 74% in the first half of this year. It is reasonable that some of these excessive profits should be taxed and used to alleviate the dire circumstances faced by many people in my constituency.

Other measures to alleviate the hardship people are experiencing that the Government could implement now would be to give a double child benefit payment to every child, cap electricity prices and assist low and middle income families by means of a direct cost-of-living cash payment to support workers and families.

9 o'clock

Families are suffering now and, as winter approaches, it is going to get worse. Now is the time to implement remedial measures to alleviate some of the pain resulting from this cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The windfall tax we are proposing would be an anti-inflation measure. Sinn Féin is putting forward a proposal to protect households from any further price gouging by big electricity suppliers. We are calling for electricity prices to be reduced and capped at 2021 levels throughout the winter period, until at least February 2023. Irish households have experienced soaring price hikes and energy costs as well as other crippling increases in prices in a whole range of areas including food, transport and others. They badly need support. There have been almost 50 energy price increases over the past year. The *Financial Times* places Ireland 26th out of 27 countries in the EU with regard to State support for households during the energy crisis. Those are the facts as set out by the *Financial Times*. This Government can no longer sit on its hands while workers and families struggle and people freeze with the cold this winter. The so-called market is broken. Sinn Féin is calling for a proactive response to this crisis. We would establish a fund of €1.6 billion, which is affordable, which would be ring-fenced from this year's budget surplus of €4.5 billion. That is without going near the contingency fund of €2.5 billion. This would be supported by revenue from a windfall tax on energy companies.

This windfall tax would be applied to any excess profits made by electricity suppliers as has been done in a number of other European countries. This is an anti-inflationary measure which would reduce prices at source and help right across the economy. The €1.6 billion fund would provide households with energy security and certainty throughout the winter. It would save households in the region of €600 on their bills and would stop price gouging by the big suppliers. Our approach is in stark contrast to the Government's, which is inflationary. We are not writing a blank cheque for energy companies to extract profits. Any excess profits would be taxed to stop this. That is the difference. Instead, we want to fix energy prices so that ordinary people can be protected and so that households have certainty.

Sinn Féin also proposes cost-of-living cash payments. Those earning €21,000 a year would receive a cash payment of €500 while those earning €40,000 would receive €407. The figure would be tapered further on incomes up to €70,000, beyond which nothing would be received.

These emergency measures would help households throughout the winter and are badly needed.

With regard to energy security, a number of years ago, I raised in this Chamber the need for the power stations at Shannonbridge and Lough Ree to be kept open. The power station in Edenderry has been co-fired and is now moving completely to biomass. The same thing could be done in those two power stations. I pointed out that these are in pivotal positions on the energy grid. The cutaway bogs surrounding the stations have ample space for solar panels. They are plug-in points to the electricity grid. We need dispatchable power. Wind power could also be plugged in at these sites. The wind does not blow all of the time. There could also be a hub for biomass to be connected in. These should have been power generation hubs. We were not listened to. I published a document five years ago, *Powering Ireland 2030*, that would have moved us to 80% renewable. We got no hearing on it. The media and those on the Government benches were not interested. Nobody was interested. I raised some of these issues with the Minister of State's party leader, who was on the Joint Committee on Climate Action at the time, and he told me that, if we were stuck for power, we could import nuclear power from Britain. At that time, I told him that what we needed was dispatchable power here in this country. We could have had that. We could have had the dispatchable power we need but we were not listened to.

One of the best ways to get that dispatchable power is through biomass. We were in a position to do that. Those two power stations should have been converted. That was not done but should be done now. Those two power stations need to be reopened for that purpose and to become plug-in points at those pivotal positions on the national energy grid so that we can generate power at those sites from solar and wind but, because the wind does not blow all the time and the sun does not shine all the time, also from biomass.

Gas must also be recognised as a transition fuel. We have to recognise this reality. There are coal mines in China as big as County Dublin and County Laois put together. I am not arguing for that here. I know we have to move away from fossil fuels but we also have to recognise the reality that gas results in lower carbon emissions than coal. We can agree on that much. The emissions are far lower. That should have been done at the time. Instead, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and now the Green Party have sleepwalked us into this energy security crisis. What is the Government's proposal? It is to import generators. I heard the Taoiseach on the radio yesterday morning. He did not inspire confidence in me. If I heard him correctly, he said that it would be 2023 before these emergency generators were in place. I understand that a figure of €40 million was mentioned. What are these to be fuelled with? Is it diesel? Is that the case? What are we going to fuel these emergency generators with? We had a sustainable way of reducing carbon emissions. Fair enough, we had to move away from peat but we could have used biomass, biogas, anaerobic generation and all of the other means we could use to generate electricity. We did not do that. This Government, and every Government over the past 12 years, has dragged its heels with regard to planning regulations for offshore wind generation. After 20 years, we have seven turbines off our coast. It is a scandal. We should be exporting energy. We should be a net exporter of energy to the rest of Europe. We are not doing that. Instead, we have sleepwalked into this crisis. We are now hostage to the big energy companies, which have us over a barrel. We need to take some control.

The measures put forward by Sinn Féin tonight go some way towards doing that, as we hope the measures to come out at European level over the next week or so to tackle the big generators also will. That serves that purpose. The specific measures we are proposing will help to deal with the suppliers and the smaller generators. I also ask the Minister of State, as a matter

of urgency, to forget about all the *culs-de-sac* the Government has allowed us to walk into and to look again at Shannonbridge and Lough Ree. Let us face up to common sense and work with good companies such as Bord na Móna, which we own, and the ESB to get this power going. EU rules can be waived in an emergency. The Minister of State and I both know that. In an emergency, all bets are off with regard to the rules. We both know that. Let us move to a greener future in which jobs and energy security are produced and in which prices are lowered. Let us implement the measures put forward by Sinn Féin tonight along with the once-off financial package for households.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: A vote has been called, which is deferred until the voting block arises next week.

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) Deputies Michael Collins, Mattie McGrath and Holly Cairns - to discuss the loss of the mental health residential beds in Bantry General Hospital; (2) Deputies Ruairí Ó Murchú, Pauline Tully, Réada Cronin, Darren O'Rourke and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the issue of school transport difficulties experienced by families this academic year and how they might be resolved; (3) Deputies Marc Ó Cathasaigh and David Cullinane - to discuss the impact of the closure of a bus service on the people of Dunmore, Portlaw and Passage East; (4) Deputy Gino Kenny - to discuss record waiting lists for treatment in public hospitals as highlighted recently by the Irish Hospital Consultants Association; (5) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - to discuss the deteriorating problem of an illegal dump in Darndale Park, Dublin Bay North; (6) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss decommissioning the wind farm at Derrybrien during an energy crisis; (7) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss the avian flu outbreak in Ireland; (8) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss Rosscarbery and Owenahincha wastewater treatment infrastructure; (9) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - to discuss the impact of guardian *ad litem* rules on mothers and the interests of children; (10) Deputy Michael Moynihan - to discuss the urgent need for earlier bus services between Cork and Limerick to serve students and workers; (11) Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Michael Fitzmaurice - to discuss the reintroduction of the Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016; (12) Deputy Paul Murphy - to discuss the report of the working group to examine defects in housing; (13) Deputy John Paul Phelan - to discuss accommodating all primary and post-primary students still seeking school bus tickets; (14) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss how carer's allowance is means tested when a marriage breakdown is involved; (15) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss why income thresholds for social housing eligibility did not increase in Limerick; (16) Deputy Mick Barry - to discuss the rate of the minimum wage in light of the increased cost of living; and (17) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss the progress and efficiency of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF.

The matters raised by the Deputies have been selected for discussion and will be taken in the following order: Deputies Michael Collins, Mattie McGrath and Cairns, Deputy Durkan, Deputies Ó Cuív and Fitzmaurice, and Deputy Buckley.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Mental Health Services

Deputy Holly Cairns: The proposed reduction in the number of beds in the mental health unit in Bantry General Hospital is extremely worrying. The unit provides a vital service for west Cork in treating people in their own locality. Since the news broke, many people have been speaking about the fantastic help they received in the unit including, in some cases, life-saving assistance. I cannot emphasise enough how important these beds are for west Cork. The planned decrease from 18 to 11 beds is due to a finding from the Mental Health Commission concerning the state of the building and physical infrastructure. The HSE legally has to comply with this ruling. The management has said that if it had the resources for a viable plan to address the issues, it could make a compelling appeal. No one wants to compromise standards and nobody wants the beds to close. We need the Minister of State to intervene immediately in the situation and work with the hospital and the community healthcare organisation management to put a solution in place. This can be resolved by political will. We are looking at a reduction from 18 beds to 11. The average capacity in the mental health unit in Bantry at the moment is generally between 14 and 16. What will happen to the people who are normally in those three to four additional beds? Presumably the first option is that they will be moved to other facilities or places like Carraig Mór. They will be moved out of acute care for all the wrong reasons. If there was a plan like there is in older people's care, for example, that had multi-annual funding, the commission would know something would change down the line. At this point, what are we offering it? There are no solutions so it is going to reduce the number of beds even though we have exactly what we need at the moment. The commission has to do its job and the HSE has to comply. The Government needs to fund this on a multi-annual basis to ensure we can keep those beds.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing this Topical Issues debate, which is a huge issue for the people of Cork South-West. The Minister of State will be well aware of the recent recommendation from the Mental Health Commission to reduce the number of beds in the Bantry Centre for Mental Health Care and Recovery from 18 to 11. This is a huge retrograde step for mental health services in the west Cork area and one to which I am vehemently opposed. I am disappointed that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is not here as she is responsible for mental health, or the Minister for Health. It is a huge issue for us in west Cork.

In 2019, an inspection report from the Mental Health Commission found that the Bantry Centre for Mental Health Care and Recovery scored 88% on compliance. This was an indication that huge investment was urgently needed there. In 2021, the Mental Health Commission again found the compliance rate was 88%. There was no deterioration in the score but, more significantly, none of the recommendations made by the commission had been implemented since the previous findings. Perhaps the Minister of State could tell us why that happened. In response to a parliamentary question, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, said the Mental Health Commission has made a decision to put a restriction on the registration of the centre, reducing the total number of registered beds from 18 to 11 due to its concern about the size of residents' bedrooms in the centre. She says she has requested a detailed report from the HSE on the matter, which is awaited.

The reply also states the HSE has informed the Minister of State that it is currently examining all options available to it. What are the options here? There is only one option for the people of Cork South-West. The HSE has to appeal this decision immediately. Somebody has made a major cock-up here. Somebody has to put their hand up in the air and say who it is and heads have to roll. We cannot go from 18 beds to 11. The Government cannot walk away from this. The Taoiseach was in Bantry hospital two weeks ago promising the earth, the moon and the stars, while opening an injury unit that was opened nine years previously. I would welcome the Taoiseach coming to west Cork any time. I would never refuse him coming to Bantry hospital but for God's sake, he should come down and give us some good news. He promised there would be no loss of services and here we are two weeks later with the massive loss of a mental health service being proposed.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter. As they have outlined, the Mental Health Commission has made the decision to put a restriction on the registration of the Centre for Mental Health Care and Recovery in Bantry General Hospital, given its concerns over the size of residents' bedrooms in the centre. This decision would mean the centre's total number of registered beds would reduce from 18 to 11. The centre, which is located on the grounds of Bantry General Hospital, provides residents with acute care, rehabilitation and recovery supports for their mental health difficulties. It serves the local west Cork area, including areas around Skibbereen, Clonakilty and Bantry.

The HSE is currently examining all options available to it in light of this decision and is in dialogue with the Mental Health Commission as part of the regulatory process. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has requested a detailed report from the HSE on the matter, which is expected shortly and following the HSE's options appraisal. The Minister of State would like to assure the Deputies that she will continue to liaise with the HSE to ensure all decisions and actions taken regarding the centre are made with the best interests of the residents in mind, both from a health and safety viewpoint and with regard to the provision of appropriate treatments.

Mental health remains a key priority for the Government and we are fully committed to the delivery of high-quality, person-centred, recovery-oriented mental health services. Our long-term strategic aim for our mental health services is to provide a consistent, high-quality service for anyone in need of support for their mental health. Mental health residences, such as the centre in Bantry, provide an important step-down service for people with mental health difficulties, enabling their rehabilitation and recovery and assisting them to move towards independent community living accommodation. This aim is supported by our national policies, Sharing the Vision and Sláintecare.

It is our responsibility to ensure the provision of high-quality mental health services that are fit for purpose. The Government acknowledges that mental health services must constantly evolve and develop to ensure they are in line with international best practice and regulatory requirements. It is positive to note that there has been an overall improvement in compliance among approved mental health centres in recent years. However, it is recognised that further improvements are required to ensure mental health centres continue to meet the appropriate regulatory requirements. The Government continues to invest in mental health centres through capital planning. Some €14 million has been allocated to mental health services in 2022 and a further €6 million has been allocated through minor works capital. The Minister for Health has assured us that additional funding will be sought in 2023 to continue to improve premises.

An Ceann Comhairle: If I were to paraphrase that, the Mental Health Commission is saying the rooms are a bit small and therefore it is going to dispatch people off somewhere else. That is my reading of that reply, although it is not for me to say.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I think the Ceann Comhairle's analysis is accurate. Unfortunately, that was not a very reassuring response from the Minister of State. Rhetoric like Sharing the Vision around mental health services is utterly irrelevant when we are talking about a reduction from 18 beds to 11. Like the Ceann Comhairle said, these people will be moved somewhere else but facilities like Carraig Mór do not provide acute care. People will be moving from acute care for the wrong reasons, because the facility is not up to scratch. What is the plan? Does the Minister of State think the HSE should appeal this decision? On what grounds could it do so? What funding is there to improve the spaces for people in the services? The most important thing here is to move quickly, so it is incredibly disappointing that the relevant Minister of State is not actually here. A strong proposal from her could save these vital beds. If we want to take mental health seriously then these beds are needed. They must be retained and they must be up to scratch. The staff in Bantry hospital do incredible work, not only in mental health services but in essential healthcare for the region. This situation only increases local fears around the future of the hospital. The Minister of State's support, via going to the relevant Minister, would not only help save the service but would boost confidence in the continued role of Bantry hospital.

Deputy Michael Collins: Despite costly inspectorial reports and recommendations, this centre has had no financial input over the years. The service is vital in catering for mental health care and recovery for a huge population, comprising over 180,000 people. I commend the staff in the unit, who must be working under pressure because there has been no investment in the centre. Now they are worried about their jobs and rightly so. I urgently request that the HSE appeals this proposal. The answer the Minister of State gave does not cut it with the people of west Cork. We are within hours of these beds being closed. We need urgent action. I will be coming back into the Dáil tomorrow and I will ask the same question. I plead with the Minister of State to speak with Deputy Butler so she can work with the HSE and at least take the first steps to set in motion the appeal for the people of Cork South-West. We need that mental health service. I will ask that question here again tomorrow and I plead for the Minister of State to have an answer stating that appeal is at least in motion. Then we will have to look at the funding. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have let down the people in Cork South-West before with the maternity unit in that hospital. Now they are going to do it with the mental health service in that hospital.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am sorry but it is making people very angry. People are very angered over this in Cork South-West.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know but I ask the Deputy to mind his blood pressure, for God's sake.

Deputy Michael Collins: I might need Bantry hospital myself.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I hear the Deputies loud and clear. Both the Government and HSE value the regulation of our mental health services. It provides a framework in which to constantly review and improve our services so they remain person-centred. The long-term

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strategic aim for mental health services is to provide a consistent, quality approach across all mental health residences. The Government will continue to work with the Mental Health Commission and the HSE to improve our mental health services and to ensure they best serve the needs of our service users. I thank Deputies for raising this important matter and assure them that their views will be taken to the Minister of State. I understand the Minister of State wanted to be here tonight. She had to attend a family bereavement. She will be informed of further developments relating to the centre. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will continue to liaise with the HSE to ensure the care needs and preferences of the residents remain central to any decisions made about the mental health care and recovery centre in Bantry. The Deputies stated that they want the Minister of State to liaise with the various stakeholders. I understand that she is doing that. We value the Mental Health Commission. It makes decisions and we have to work with those decisions. The Minister of State is doing everything possible with the Deputies. I thank them for raising this important issue.

Family Law Cases

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this issue. It is an important issue and I thank the Minister for coming into the House to address it. I know this family well. In a family law procedure, both sides have an opportunity to make their case and have it challenged. In the case of this particular woman, she was greeted with a child psychology report, which was accepted without challenge. She was never given an opportunity to challenge it. The Minister and I have been in courts across this country and in our neighbouring country many times. I have never seen a case where a situation was not challengeable by the other side, but it could not be challenged in this case.

The upshot of everything was that the children were taken away from the mother and handed over to the father, who was absent from the house for reasons which had arisen prior. Since last May, that mother has not had an opportunity to meet her children. One of them tried to run away from school. The child is distressed and unhappy. The mother of the children is always regarded as the primary carer. To take the children away from their natural mother is the most appalling thing that can be done to any woman, because it challenges her right to be regarded as a good mother. This woman rejects vehemently all the charges that were made against her. Most of all, in the lead-up to a final decision, she has been prevented from talking to her children on the basis that she might turn them against their father. That is not a good enough excuse.

The mother's rights are being violated. She was in touch with Tusla. I was in touch with Tusla myself. It was very helpful, but it has been barred from intervening by the powers that be. This has happened for some reason, whether due to guardian *ad litem* rules or some other rule that has not been seen before. I have my own ideas about why this happened. Incidentally, she was obliquely threatened, in the event that she raised this with any public body, including Tusla, or with public representatives. My answer to that kind of thing is that we are glad to hear from the body in question, but we have heard that before, and threats do not count. The most important thing is that the mother's right to be with her children is protected. If the courts decide afterwards, on the basis of evidence which has been correctly challenged by one side or another, then we will accept that decision, but we will accept nothing until that decision comes about.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister for being here to deal with what is obviously a very sensitive matter.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank Deputy Durkan for raising this important matter. It is of huge significance to the family involved. I am not aware of any of the circumstances of this case. The question submitted to me related specifically to guardians *ad litem*, which have a very narrow remit. From what the Deputy has described, I am not sure how much directly covers the situation. The situation raised is a broader issue relating to the operation of the family court. Even though it is the family court, it is more a matter for the Minister, Deputy McEntee, than for me. I have prepared an answer relating to guardians *ad litem*, which I will deliver. I am not sure that it will enlighten the Deputy with regard to this situation, but I will engage with it to the extent that I can.

A guardian *ad litem* or GAL is appointed in childcare proceedings to inform the court of any views which the child wishes to express and to advise the court on what, in his or her professional opinion, is in the child’s best interests. GALs do not make decisions regarding parents’ access to their children. Any such decisions are taken by a judge. Court orders regarding children in care are matters for the court and as Minister I cannot interfere in any such decision. However, as Minister, I am working to ensure the law relating to children in need of protection is updated and improved where needed.

I recently brought the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 through the Houses of the Oireachtas. It was signed into law in July. This Act provides for reform of the GAL system, and will allow me to establish a new national GAL service with an executive office in my Department. Preparatory work to open that office is under way. I am pleased to inform the Deputy that I plan to commence sections 1, 4, 6 and 13 of the Act next week. These cover wider areas of reform. First, there is a requirement that the court regard the best interests of the child as the paramount consideration, which is relevant to what the Deputy has discussed. Second, there is a reform that ensures the Child Law Project and any similar projects will have access to relevant court documents and allows officials to attend childcare proceedings for specific purposes.

My Department is also reviewing the Child Care Act 1991, which is the major legislation that deals with taking children into care, whether foster care or special care. I look forward to bringing the heads of an amendment Bill to the Government by the end of this year and hopefully getting that legislation passed next year. The 1991 Act is wide-ranging legislation which, at its core, seeks to promote the welfare of children who may not receive adequate care and protection. My Department has consulted extensively with stakeholders to collect their views on the legislation, including through calls for written submissions and a number of consultation events. That Bill will revise and update the 1991 Act to better reflect changes in child welfare and protection services in Ireland in the 30 years since enactment and the constitutional recognition of children as individual rights holders. It will also allow for positive practice developments to be enshrined in law where needed.

Reflecting on the facts the Deputy has outlined, I am not sure if the GAL is the issue here. I think the issue might be the wider process used by the court. I draw the Deputy’s attention to the legislation passed earlier this year. I am about to activate the piece relevant to the principle of the best interests of the child being pursued. That is perhaps of as much relevance to the case that the Deputy has brought to our attention this evening.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Minister has answered the questions himself. It is imperative that Tusla get involved in the case. The court directing that it is not welcome is, to my mind, a violation of the mother’s rights, which cannot be tolerated. I ask the Minister to

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encourage Tusla to get involved in the case to secure the children's rights. Presumably, the court psychologist's report would back that up, but it did not, because it was only requisitioned on behalf of one side. The other person was not allowed to counter it. I cannot understand how that could happen. If it is an attempt to set a precedent and change the law, I do not understand how that could happen either, because we change the law here. The point is that the law is the law. People will always say that they want justice when they go to the courts, but as I always say that they will get the law. We do not want anything else. The rules are that the interests of the child be put to the front of every argument and debate of that nature. I have dealt with scores of them, just as the Ceann Comhairle and other Members of the House have. In every single case, the rights of the child had to be protected. In this case there are two children separated from their mother by order. I believe it is a violation of the rights of the children and the rights of the mother.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Deputy. Obviously, there are clear lines of responsibilities between me as the Minister and Tusla as the agency that answers to the Department. I cannot direct them to take certain actions but perhaps if the Deputy would communicate some details about this case to me I can ask if agency staff have any concerns about the processes here. This is as much as I can do to intervene. I can do that. Obviously, we have to leave their decisions. I am also very aware that this is a court decision. Unhappy as the Deputy is, there is the Executive and Judiciary and there are lines of responsibility there. Maybe in the first instance the details of the case could be passed on to my office and we could have an element of engagement with Tusla to ensure all processes are properly adhered to.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a very helpful response.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Absolutely.

Proposed Legislation

An Ceann Comhairle: Our next important matter comes jointly from Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Michael Fitzmaurice. They wish to discuss with the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, the reintroduction of the Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016. Since they both raised this in the House some months ago, I have raised it at every meeting of the Business Committee since, requiring that the matter be brought forward. I am afraid that the answer I receive has not changed from the start; it is still being looked at in the Department. There is a lot of looking going on.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I thank the Minister of State for coming into the House at this late hour. Having asked about this issue a number of times, with Deputy Fitzmaurice, I had not foreseen on the Adjournment that we would have to come in again. I have raised it under Questions on Policy and Legislation and so on. I have tabled written parliamentary questions and I keep getting the same answer.

I was very disappointed today when the list of promised legislation was published. I read the list and, in particular, the priority legislation only to see that this legislation is not on the priority list. I then looked at the list of all the other legislation for this session, which is a massive list, and found it. It is in the also-rans. All it states beside it in the right-hand margin is that

work is under way. I find this extraordinary. My understanding is that the logistical difficulties of bringing the Bill back in have long been resolved and that all the Government has to do is bring it back on Final Stage where it stopped before. A number of amendments were made in the Seanad but 11 were Government amendments so presumably the Government was happy with those. They just have to bring them back in, put them down on the table and say, “Can we agree that they are all passed?” That means we were left with four amendments that had been put forward by Independent Senators and accepted in the Seanad. It baffles me that two and three quarter years later the Minister of State’s office and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel have not been able to agree to either accept, amend or reject these four amendments.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I concur with Deputy Ó Cuív. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House, but, to be honest, what is going on is shambolic. I want to know if this is a Civil Service problem. We are sick and tired of this. In fairness, the Ceann Comhairle has gone above and beyond for everyone to ensure that this would be accommodated. Deputy Ó Cuív and myself have followed this. I know the consequences of this. I know farmers around the country who want to plant forestry but because it was in a natural heritage area, NHA, it is to be taken out under category 2 and they cannot do it. As well as the farmer losing, the country is losing. It is shambolic what is going on. I want to know who is responsible for this. Is it within the Minister of State’s Department where an assistant secretary or a principal officer is responsible? This has to be called out now. It has been going on for too long. The Bill came in here. Deputy Ó Cuív was here and Deputy Kyne was here in the previous Dáil. He came in one evening. We are willing and, to be fair to the Ceann Comhairle, I am sure that he is willing to accommodate it. There is many a Thursday evening here when the Dáil is gone early. I am damn sure, in fairness to the Ceann Comhairle, that he is well willing to do it.

People in their offices do not understand that this is causing untold hardship for people right around the country. It is neither here nor there; it is something that neither is or is not. The minute anyone looks at the map now they say, “Oh, it is an NHA so we cannot go near it.” It is constant. When they look at the area they go, “No, it is an NHA”. It had indeed been designated even though it was categorised by the Department with scientific knowledge that it was to be taken out. It is scientific knowledge that is behind it. Everyone supported it. Deputy Ó Cuív knows more about it than I do and he has made it very clear that hurdles were jumped and all we had to do was get the Bill in. I want to know who is holding this up because we need to go to someone to find out.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Before I read the reply, it is with regret that we are here again this evening. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his intervention in trying to get this forward. Like you, I want this matter resolved once and for all to give clarity to those landowners that the Deputies talk about and to get this important Bill over the line.

As the Deputies will be aware, the Bill was originally presented to the Oireachtas in 2016. The debate on the Bill in both Houses was very engaging, with a good discussion on extending its scope to provide for a review of blanket bog natural heritage areas, NHAs, and later in the Seanad on placing a duty on public bodies to promote the conservation of biodiversity.

The core focus of the Wildlife (Amendment) Bill, as initiated, was to provide for: the making, amendment and revocation of natural heritage area orders; a review of raised bog habitats; and for those purposes to amend the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000. The Bill had completed all stages in the Dáil and the Seanad and had been returned to the Dáil so that various amend-

ments made by the Seanad could be considered. However, the Bill, unfortunately, lapsed with the dissolution of the 32nd Dáil on 14 January 2020.

As I have previously set out, Standing Order 227 provides that where a Bill passed by the Dáil is subsequently amended and passed by the Seanad, those amendments are then returned to the Dáil for its consideration. Standing Order 228 provides that the Dáil may accept, amend or reject the Seanad amendments. Amendments in the Dáil to the Seanad's amendments may only be moved where they are "consequential upon the acceptance, amendment or rejection of a Seanad amendment". There is no mechanism under Standing Orders to move amendments to a Bill returned to the Dáil under Standing Order 227, other than as set out in Standing Order 228.

The Deputies will recall that we met to discuss this matter late last year and, indeed, they have raised this matter with me in the House since then through a Topical Issue matter. As we discussed then, the restoration of this Bill to the Order Paper is not straightforward.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I would nearly be able to put this to music if I had any musical skills because we keep getting the same answer. For example, "As we discussed then, the restoration of this Bill to the Order paper is not straightforward." It is my understanding that this issue was resolved and that it is straightforward: one brings back the amendments or makes amendments under the relevant Standing Order to those amendments, and then the Bill comes back in.

As I have said, there are four amendments that could be contentious, and the rest are Government amendments. They are not that complex as issues. Amendment No. 2 was tabled by Senator Alice Mary Higgins and Senator Lynn Ruane to allow the Minister to propose a site for designation by virtue of its role in carbon sequestration or pollination specifically. That is either accepted, rejected or amended. I do not see the complication there. Amendment No. 13 requires the Minister to commission a report on the guidelines of threshold for turbary rights, including a definition of household dues. It is not rocket science. Amendment No. 14 would effectively require the Minister, before making an order to dedesignate a natural heritage area, NHA, to lay a report before the Oireachtas on the site's condition, restoration, rewetting potential and so on. If the Ceann Comhairle will give me a little indulgence, there is one more, No. 15.

Let us be clear that we are seeking to give the Minister of State the ultimate Aladdin's lamp, because we are giving him new, pristine lands to designate as NHAs in return for degraded NHA bog, and he will not take the Aladdin's lamp when he is getting the new lamp. He must think there is a genie inside.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: With the amendment Deputy Ó Cuív spoke about, the science is done already. There were categories 1 and 2. I remember when they were being done at the time. The science has been done by competent scientists. It is there for the Minister of State. No one else has to look at it. He decides then on the amendments. I think turbary rights have been sorted in recent weeks where people have the right to cut their turf, sell it and whatever.

On the science of the bogs, the National Parks and Wildlife Service looked at them. It got in RPS and the head scientist to look at the bogs and there was no way they could be regenerated. That is the bottom line. The service said it would give people a better bog. If I had a bad sheep, there was a really good one over the way and someone said they would give me that one

for this one, I would be inclined to jump fairly quick for it. The Minister of State, however, or rather not him, in fairness, but his Department, does not want to.

On the day we sat down with the Minister of State for the meeting, and I thank him for that meeting, I understood from listening to the civil servants talking that every obstacle was gone and everything was sorted, but then we came into the House. In fairness to the Ceann Comhairle and his team, he said anything he could do, he would accommodate it. In our opinion and that of Deputy Ó Cuív, every obstacle was gone out of the way, but tonight, when we read the palaver some civil servant wrote, I wonder if they even looked back or if they just said they would put this answer down for these two guys, it might shut them up after 12 minutes and then they could go home. We are not going to shut up about this. We are going to keep at it until we get this in here and over the line.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I think everyone in public life recognises the Deputies involved are not going to be silenced. I think we also all acknowledge the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, has been nothing but helpful on this matter from the start.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Yes.

An Ceann Comhairle: On the question of process, can I make it abundantly clear that if the Bill we are going to deal with is the return of the Bill that has made its way through the House and through the Seanad together with the amendments that were contemplated, that is completely simple and straightforward. No rocket science is involved and no complexity. If the Government, on the other hand, is going to change the Bill radically with a pile of other previously unheard of amendments, that is where the complication would lie.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Yes. That is not the intention. The intention is to try to make it as swift and clean as possible. I appreciate the frustration of the House and both Deputies in particular as well as that of the landowners the Deputy spoke about. I give my assurance that, if it requires it, I will sit down and look at where the obstacles are. I will organise a meeting with both Deputies in the next week or so, if that is okay. We will do that and try to find out once and for all where the obstacles lie in this because I want it resolved. We have a new national biodiversity action plan in train and we really need to move forward in resolving this for the common good. I give my sincere apologies to both Deputies.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Sorry to talk out of turn but, given the Minister of State said he will hold a meeting for Deputies shortly, and, in fairness to the Ceann Comhairle, he has made it clear he is accommodating, and we thank him for that, it would be very helpful if it was possible for a representative of the Ceann Comhairle or the Ceann Comhairle to be available so that we would not be going over and back and that we would have everyone there able to say “Yea” or “Nay” on whether this can go through. Would that be possible and in that way we would finally put it to bed?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: If it was useful or was agreeable to the Ceann Comhairle, I think we could.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will do whatever I can to help.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I appreciate that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State for being here to talk about that par-

ticular matter.

Social Welfare Eligibility

Deputy Pat Buckley: This is a bit of a tricky issue. I will give some brief background with a synopsis of this lady's situation. Her name is Margaret. She wrote to me to say she is the mother to her daughter of 36 years. Her daughter has Fraser syndrome and to date is the only one in Ireland with that syndrome. She is deaf, dumb, registered blind and is autistic. She explains how she does the hardest job in the world rearing her disabled daughter, which is extremely demanding and a thankless job. Her day starts at 5.30 a.m., showering dressing, brushing her daughter's hair and tying her shoes. Margaret's daughter is 36 years and she has spent those 36 years as her sole carer. Margaret fractured her pelvis in 2016 and had to give up work. She ended up riding a bike for a year so that she could take her daughter on her very important routine daily walks. In February, Margaret had an operation but had to discharge herself the same day to care for her daughter. If her daughter was in residential care, it would cost the State around €1,000 to €1,500 a week to care for her. However, because of Margaret's position in life, the State has awarded her €4.50 of a weekly allowance to care for her daughter. Margaret wrote that she actually thought she was a good mother but the State had made her feel worthless. She says it is an insult to her and to others who give up their lives and freedom to look after their disabled children.

The letter came from the Department about the allowance being means tested. I am well aware there are many convenience marriages in the country and, after Covid, there are many more. The couple are living two separate lives but they are being means tested as if they were together. That means that poor mother has literally nothing. Her sole job is to care for her daughter. To get that news from the Department would break your soul. I know the woman personally. I see her anytime, and it does not matter what time of year it is, she has to take her daughter out for a walk. It is one of the simplest things. She feels so worthless. She said she did not want to come to me and she did not want to complain but it was such a measly amount. She tried to explain to the Department that the husband, or ex-husband, despite being at the same address, only supports the daily household bills. That lady does not have the opportunity to earn money. She is entitled to a carer's allowance, but because it is means tested including the husband's income, the State has decided to give her €4.50.

I raise this issue in the House because I raised it a good few weeks ago directly with the Minister through the pigeon hole, as it were, but I have had no response or acknowledgement. It does not look good for me when I am trying to do my job to help people, and that is why I raise it here tonight. There has to be a mechanism where a person can, first of all, talk to a human being in any Department, where he or she has an opportunity to come in front of a board or somebody to explain his or her real-life story, to prove it, and to ask that it be looked on with empathy in order that the assessor can see he or she did not realise the situation. That happens. My biggest problem is that I raised it with the Minister directly and I have not had any response - I am very disappointed with that - and I have nowhere for this woman to turn to fight her case for herself and her child. That is why I raise it tonight. I do not expect a magic answer from the Minister of State tonight, but at least once it is on the record we can come back and revisit it.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is a very challenging situation. Unfortunately, in matters like this nothing is clear-cut. The Government recognises

the crucial role that family carers play in Irish society and is fully committed to their support through a range of supports and services. This commitment is recognised in both the programme for Government and the national carers strategy.

Carer's allowance is a means-tested payment primarily aimed at carers on low incomes who look after certain people who are in need of full-time care and attention. At the end of July 2022, there were a total of 91,093 recipients of carer's allowance caring for 102,330 people. The projected expenditure on the scheme in 2022 is approximately €990 million.

The system of social assistance supports provides payments based on an income need, with the means test playing the critical role in determining whether an income need arises as a consequence of a particular contingency, be that illness, disability, unemployment or caring. This ensures that the recipient has a verifiable income need and scarce resources are targeted to those who need them most.

The specific means-test conditionality for the carer's allowance scheme is consistent with the overall rules applying to the range of social assistance payments. It should, however, be noted that the income disregards available for carer's allowance are the most generous in the social welfare system and have been recently increased as part of budget 2022.

For social assistance schemes, the total household income is assessed as part of the means test. In the circumstances where a couple has separated but continue to live in the same home, the Department provides that a social welfare inspector may investigate the case and report on the living and financial circumstances of the couple. This report will assist the deciding officer in finalising the decision on the means criteria and whether they should be assessed separately or as a couple. All decisions may be appealed. I am not sure if this has taken place in the case the Deputy has raised.

The carer's support grant is automatically paid to people in receipt of carer's allowance, carer's benefit and domiciliary care allowance in June of each year. Other carers not in receipt of a carer's payment may also be eligible for the grant. The objective of the carer's support grant is to support carers in their caring role and carers may use the grant in a manner that is appropriate to their needs. The grant is paid in respect of each person being cared for to take account of the additional cost of providing care and to recognise the particular challenges faced by these carers. As part of the 2021 budget measures, the rate of the grant was increased by €150. The new rate of €1,850 came into effect from June 2021. This is the highest rate of the grant since its introduction.

On Thursday, 2 June, the grant was paid to 121,000 carers and their families. The overall cost of the grant in 2022 is expected to be over €262 million. I know these statistics are of no use to the mother the Deputy mentioned. I can raise this matter with the Minister on the Deputy's behalf. It was important that he raised it this evening on behalf of his constituent.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for the answer. There is hope and light in his response. The Department provides the social welfare inspector, so at least there is an avenue there. When the information comes back from the Department, it outlines the deadline for appeal but does not state that the person has opportunities if his or her circumstances are different. I welcome that. I got more than I expected because, I suppose, I am a realist.

This woman wanted to stand up because she suspected that there were other affected parents around the country. She told me that at her age, she should not be worrying about it but that a

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measly bloody €4.50 a week was an absolute insult. She asked how many more people this was happening to and said she wanted to stand up and fight, not only for her child but also for other families to set a precedent. At least I can ring that woman tomorrow and say we can possibly set up a meeting with the social welfare inspector.

These are individual cases and they can be very difficult. They are obviously also private. I do not feel good about bringing the details of somebody else's private life into a public chamber. As I was asked and given permission to do it and this is the last chance saloon for the person, it needs to be done. I thank the Minister of State for his response. I will follow it up with the lady and also with the Department of Social Protection.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: This is the correct Chamber to raise such a situation. It is important for the Deputy's constituent to be aware of that. There is a broader issue about making this information clearer to families in that situation. The information should be made clear on the forms and at point of contact, such as websites, etc. Perhaps the Deputy's constituent was not aware of it. I hope he can bring it to her attention. Many people find themselves in a situation of marriage breakdown or whatever and because of those circumstances are denied benefits to which they should be entitled. I hope the response will provide an avenue for the lady in question and her family. I again thank the Deputy for raising the matter this evening.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.55 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Déardaoin, an 15 Meán Fómhair 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.55 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 15 September 2022.