



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 23 Eanáir 2024

Tuesday, 23 January 2024

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.
Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Bogfaimid ar aghaidh le Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí. Arís, a gentle reminder about time limits and mobile phones.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Go raibh maith agat. Three years ago, the Taoiseach's Government promised it would stop vulture funds bulk-buying family homes from under the noses of ordinary homebuyers. This followed considerable public anger on the back of a fund attempting to buy up the majority of homes at Mullen Park in Maynooth. On the floor of the Dáil the Taoiseach said:

What happened in Maynooth and Hollystown is not right. We do not want investment funds in any form coming in and buying substantially complete developments that could have been bought by first-time buyers, upgraders or even approved housing bodies ...

The Taoiseach then proceeded to introduce measures that left the door wide open for vultures. At the time, we warned the Taoiseach that his Government's measures were doomed to failure. We told him the Government had not gone far enough to deter the vultures but he ignored those warnings.

Fast forward two and a half years and more than 1,200 family homes have been snapped up by vulture funds since the Government introduced its regulations. These are homes on which vulture funds charge extortionate rent. Far from stopping the vulture funds, they are laughing all the way to the bank. It is a real kick in the teeth for everyone who has saved every spare euro and made real sacrifices to try to get a mortgage deposit together.

The latest such scandal has occurred at Belcamp Manor in north Dublin, where a vulture fund snapped up 46 of 54 homes in that estate, robbing ordinary families of the chance to buy a home. These homes are going to be let out at rents of upwards of €3,000 a month. The Taoiseach's response to the Belcamp Manor bulk purchase was that the Government would now have to look at what happened, but this situation did not come out of the blue. In fact, last year the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, was told by Department of Finance officials that the vulture funds had snapped up, and were still snapping up, family homes and it has got worse

since then.

The Taoiseach's Government knows and has known that this has been happening and it knows how it has happened and why. The stamp duty rate the Government set out in May 2021 on the bulk-buying of homes was just far too low. Tens of thousands of homes already in the planning process were also left at risk of being snapped up by the vultures. The Taoiseach, then, should not be surprised. This has happened because the Government left the door open and the vultures swooped through.

Caithfidh an Rialtas stop a chur leis na gcreach-chistí agus tithe á gceannach acu faoi shróna na ngnáthdhaoine. Ní mór don Rialtas gníomhú go deimhneach ar thaobh na ndaoine atá éadóchas go mbeidh siad in ann a dtithe féin a bheith acu. The Government must act now to finally clip the wings of the vulture funds. The Taoiseach said his aim is to stop these funds swooping in and buying up housing estates. Yet the Government has indicated it will vote down Sinn Féin's motion which seeks to do just that. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has said the Government is reviewing the situation. Really? At this stage?

Every TD now has a chance tomorrow night to vote to actually clip the wings of vultures. I am asking each of them to do so and to stand with ordinary homebuyers in their constituencies against the unfair financial power of the vulture funds. I am asking the Taoiseach to realise the damage these funds are doing. I urge him to change his mind and to support Sinn Féin's motion to stop these funds in their tracks.

The Taoiseach: I do not like to see investment funds buying up family homes *en masse*. I know the Deputy does not either. I have said that before. However, what she has represented in the Dáil today is not the full story. As is so often the case, she has engaged in a degree of misleading behaviour. The Government did change the law. We changed the law back in May 2021 after the events in Maynooth the Deputy has described. That change prohibited the bulk-buying of houses and duplexes by a single buyer and also allowed local authorities to apply planning conditions preventing the sale of homes in the kind of bulk seen in this case. I have looked into it. The planning permission for this particular development in Dublin 17 dates from 2019. The planning permission was therefore granted two years before the law was changed. The Deputy will understand that laws cannot be changed retrospectively in this State.

On stamp duty, stamp duty is set at 10%. We are not ruling out an increase, as the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has made clear, but it is something that has to be considered carefully because any change to tax can have unforeseen impacts and such changes sometimes do not work. We therefore need to make sure that if there is any change, it is thought through and teased out correctly. However, to be very clear, we have changed the law in this area. This could not happen in respect of any development granted planning permission from 2021 onwards. This is an old outstanding planning permission and that is why it was possible in this case.

With regard to the sale of family homes to bulk buyers, I do not have the exact figures in front of me but I think it was something like 600 or 680 out of 50,000 transactions last year, equating to perhaps 1,000 out of 100,000 transactions. It is not minimal or inconsiderable but it would not be accurate to create the impression that this is happening in great numbers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have set out the facts for the Taoiseach. I have acknowledged and put it to him that he did respond in 2021 on the back of the Maynooth situation. I also reminded him that, at the time, he was advised that he had not gone far enough. I also told him

that, in July of last year, Department officials told the Minister that the regulations were failing. They said very clearly that funds were continuing to buy up family homes. The Taoiseach says that he wants this to stop - I presume we are all in agreement on that - so I cannot for the life of me understand why he proposes to vote down a proposal that would do just that. He cannot have it both ways. The Taoiseach cannot say that he wishes this behaviour to stop and then fail to take the very measures that would stop that same behaviour. The bottom line is that the losers in this scenario are hard-pressed families and workers who, as the Taoiseach will know, have scrimped and saved only to find that despite all the rhetoric from the Government, vulture funds can still swoop in and buy up family homes.

The Taoiseach: I have not seen the detail of the advice to the Minister, Deputy McGrath. I expect that when I see it, I will find out that Deputy McDonald has not told the full story or given the full picture to the Irish people and that she has engaged in a degree of misrepresentation and misleading behaviour. I suspect that the advice will also say that the number of family homes bought up by investment funds might have been something like 1% or 2% of total sales-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It does not say that.

The Taoiseach: -----but I will double-check that. As I said earlier, the Government does not want to see family homes being bought up by investment funds. That is not the case at all. It is something we think is undesirable socially and economically. That is why we changed the law in 2021 to stop this happening. It does not apply to old permissions. This is an old permission from 2019. The Deputy's contention is that increasing stamp duty to 17% will solve the problem but she does not know that. A rate of 17% might not be enough or it might have other unintended consequences that she has not thought about and that would do harm to people and businesses. That is why it is important to give very careful consideration to any tax changes.

Deputy Holly Cairns: When will the Government act to prevent a genocide in Gaza? In just over 100 days, more than 25,000 people in Gaza have been killed. As a result of a man-made famine, 80% of the world's hungriest people are now in Gaza. Contagious disease is sweeping through the nearly 2 million displaced people. The healthcare system has been obliterated.

Not only are senior Israeli Government officials making regular genocidal statements, but they are also explicitly rejecting a two-state solution. Yesterday, Israel's foreign affairs minister suggested the international community should build an artificial island in the Mediterranean for Palestinians. It is clear the Israeli Government has lost all grip of reality, proportionality and humanity.

What is the Government waiting for? Is it waiting for the death toll to reach 30,000, 40,000 or 50,000? As the Taoiseach is aware, the Social Democrats have a motion tabled for discussion tomorrow calling on the Government to act and support South Africa's case under the genocide convention against Israel at the International Court of Justice at the earliest opportunity as a matter of urgency. Sometime after 10 p.m. last night, we found out that the Government was changing the Dáil schedule this week to introduce its own motion on Gaza today, in advance of our motion tomorrow. When I read the Government motion, I wonder why it bothered. The motion does not contain any commitment to intervene on the side of South Africa at the International Court of Justice. All it says is that this will be considered after the preliminary ruling. It is obvious the Government does not wish to use or even contemplate the word "genocide"

when it comes to Israel's actions in Gaza. That is why it is refusing to take a stance now and signal its support for South Africa at the Court of Justice. It wants to wait until it has the cover of the preliminary ruling and then it will consider its options. This approach lacks courage. It is at odds with the annihilation we are witnessing and the Government's words of support for Palestinians.

While the Government is faffing around, other countries are making their intentions clear. Germany has already announced that it will intervene in the case on the side of Israel, saying it firmly and explicitly rejects the accusation of genocide. The US and the UK have also made their views clear. They have rubbished South Africa's case as unjustified and without merit. Western countries are lining up to support Israel. There could not be more of a pressing need for countries such as Ireland to signal their support for South Africa now. The Government's claim that it cannot do so simply is not credible. In fact, it has a duty to do so. Under the genocide convention, states have a duty to punish and prevent genocide. The first step in fulfilling that duty is to assess the risk of genocide. That means starting the process now, rather than waiting. Will the Taoiseach signal Ireland's intention to intervene at the earliest possible opportunity? Will he start that process now?

The Taoiseach: Like everyone in the House, I am appalled at the ongoing violence that is occurring in Gaza and, indeed, in the West Bank and Israel, where millions of people have been displaced and tens of thousands killed, mostly women and children. We should not forget there are two sides to this conflict. It is the case that many more Palestinians have died than Israelis and many more Palestinians have been displaced than Israelis but there have been Israelis killed and Palestinians and Israelis displaced too. It is important that should be acknowledged, perhaps in the Deputy's next remarks.

In terms of what we are doing as a Government, we are working at EU level, UN level and bilateral level to do anything we practically can do to bring about a ceasefire. We were among the first countries in the world to call for a humanitarian ceasefire. That is the way we voted at UN and EU levels and we will continue to look for that because we need a ceasefire so that humanitarian aid can get in, the killing can stop and the hostages who are still being held in Gaza can be released.

What happens at the ICJ and the International Criminal Court is really important. We are very big supporters of these institutions but I am sad to say I do not believe an order from the ICJ will bring about an end to this conflict. It did not do so in Ukraine. It may be four years before the case is finally decided. This conflict will be brought to an end by diplomacy and politics. That is why we are focusing on diplomacy and politics. What the Government is asking the House to agree to tonight is to recognise that our overwhelming priority is exactly that, namely, trying to achieve a ceasefire on both sides and an end to the violence by way of diplomacy and politics. We are also demanding unhindered humanitarian access to Gaza, and we are supporting the UN in its work in that regard. We are also committing to support any decision of the ICJ on preliminary measures. These will be final and binding on the parties concerned, and we will urge all parties to the genocide convention to do so.

We are also committing to considering an intervention in the case of *South Africa v. Israel* at the ICJ. This is done at the point when South Africa would file its main case - its memorial case. While some countries have indicated that they will intervene, none has yet done so because that does not happen until that point. This is exactly the approach we took in relation to Ukraine. We will also drive efforts at EU level to bring about sanctions against violent settlers

in the West Bank.

On ICJ cases, the Attorney General will travel to The Hague on 22 February to make Ireland's intervention in respect of the situation in Israel and Palestine in person. That relates to an existing case before the ICJ regarding Israel's actions in Palestine and the West Bank. I hope that proves we are taking this seriously and that we are taking the ICJ seriously. We want to do this properly, just as we have with that case and just as we did in relation to Ukraine.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is interesting that the Taoiseach mentions the case of Ukraine. The Tánaiste had no such reluctance when it came to Russia. Less than two months after Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine he labelled it a genocide. The double standard beggars belief. Israel claims that it is doing everything in its power to protect civilians in Gaza. It says that while it is dropping 2,000-pound bombs on densely populated residential areas. These enormous bombs are not being used sparingly either. They have been dropped in their hundreds on an area half the size of Louth. How can countries that claim to value human rights and international law sit back and watch this? I agree that Ireland has been a really strong voice for the Palestinian people on the world stage, but words will not provide a defence from the bombs, famine or disease sweeping through Gaza. Saying we cannot act now is simply disingenuous. As stated, Germany has signalled its intention to act. We could signal our intention now and start the process with a legal team on establishing the case. We must stand on the right side of history with regard to this. Sitting by, watching this happen and waiting while 250 people are dying every day simply lacks the courage that is needed at this point. Will the Government act with the same degree of urgency as the Government of Germany? Will it act with the same degree of urgency as it did in the case of Ukraine and signal its intention to support South Africa's case at the ICJ immediately?

The Taoiseach: As I mentioned earlier, the Attorney General will travel to the ICJ in The Hague on 22 February and will make Ireland's intervention in respect of the case relating to Israel and Palestine and the actions happening in that regard in person. This demonstrates that we take these matters seriously and that we take the ICJ seriously. On the genocide convention case, we will adopt the same approach that we did in respect of Russia and Ukraine. We will wait until South Africa files its memorial - its main case. We will consider it and at that point we will decide on the nature of any intervention. We do agree that South Africa's case is valid.

The motion put down by the Deputy's party is good in parts, but I think it is flawed. I would like the party to consider amending it. The motion does not condemn Hamas. It does not call for the release of the hostages, and I think that is wrong. It does not call for Hamas to cease fire or to disarm. Hamas is a terrorist organisation, and terrorist organisations should disarm. The only real mention of Hamas and the events of 7 October is to say that they do not justify Israel's actions. I do not think that is good enough.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: We have done that before.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: People in Waterford and the south east know that the Taoiseach and the Government have forgotten them. In the election of 2011, 2016 and 2020, voters from across the south east who had been left to stew in their anger turned away from the traditional parties of government. Parliamentary responses I copied to the Taoiseach's office in recent weeks show that University Hospital Waterford, the south-east regional model 4 hospital, received just €83 million capital investment in the past ten years. By contrast, in the same decade, the Government awarded €227 million on average to the comparator model 4 hospitals in Gal-

way, Limerick and Cork. A sum of €87 million versus one of €227 million is evidence of pure discrimination against the south-east region.

During Leaders' Questions on 11 July last, the Taoiseach, in respect of University Hospital Waterford, stated: "under this Government €91 million has been invested in the hospital so far." Copies of parliamentary questions that I gave to the Taoiseach and each of his Ministers recently show that Waterford was awarded just €36.7 million in capital health funding by this Thirty-third Dáil, not €91 million the Taoiseach suggested. Again, this was but a fraction of the €130 million on average given to the other three hospitals I mentioned in that four-year period. The Taoiseach's statement to the House on 11 July was misleading and untrue. I therefore invite him to correct the record of the Dáil when he responds.

Given the evidence of ten years of discriminatory capital underinvestment in the hospital in Waterford, I ask whether the Taoiseach understands the right of people in the south east to be angry when they look at the current Dublin-Cork Cabinet? The evidence of shafting when it comes to investment extends beyond our hospital into the south east's aviation sector, its public transport and road development, its generation of foreign and direct investment generation and, most egregiously and especially, its higher education sector.

In the context of the South East Technological University, the Government has slow-walked a land purchase while providing no capital to carry out design work and nothing to fund construction of a new teaching building on this land site. This is despite its clear understanding that not a single new teaching building has been delivered on the campus in Waterford this millennium. The Waterford engineering building, first promised by the Taoiseach in 2011, was sideswiped by Government into a 2020 secondary phasing investment process. It is now just another broken promise to add to the many previous such promises. The three Government programmes between 2011 and 2020 singled out Waterford Institute of Technology for special attention. This is now manifested as a natty rebrand of the region in an underfunded merger. I know the Taoiseach is tired of me raising this issues. He will feel compelled to demonstrate that I am wrong by referencing other regional developments in order to prove that everything is okay. However, people in Waterford and the south east know that we are not getting our fair share. We are not fools and should not be taken as such.

The protests in respect of Irish Water were not properly understood by the Government of the day. They were never really about water. Rather, they were an expression of seething anger on the part of people who felt ignored, mistreated, let down and left behind. Despite his finely tuned political antenna, the Taoiseach does not seem to understand the building anger in the region, nor does the Government seem to be motivated to do anything to assuage it. In one of his first speeches on taking office, the Taoiseach promised that Waterford would not be forgotten. Ironically, however, that is precisely what the Government continues to do.

The Taoiseach: There has been considerable investment in University Hospital Waterford under this Government. Just since 2019, there has been a 40% increase in staffing at the hospital. The hospital's budget is now approximately €270 million. There has been a 33% increase in the budget since 2019. There has been considerable investment in Waterford. That includes the second cath lab, which people in the region campaigned very hard for over a long period. That is open now, and we want to extend the hours to weekends as soon as possible. There is a new outpatient unit. There is also the Dunmore wing, which I have had the pleasure to visit, and the new palliative care unit.

I assure the Deputy that I do not think that investment in University Hospital Waterford has been adequate either. That is why there needs to be more. Among the future investments coming is the new surgical hub, which will help people to get operations they need much more quickly, and the replacement of the adult mental health unit with a 50 single-bed unit, which I think will be a considerable improvement too. Of course, we need to examine future capacity at the hospital. It is a hospital that performs very well and that experiences very little emergency department overcrowding. It really helped out when the fire happened in Wexford hospital. Hospitals that perform well should be rewarded. That is why I want to see more investment happening in Waterford University Hospital in the coming years. The Deputy can be sure that is going to happen.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The Taoiseach did not actually correct the record in respect of what I highlighted to him. I am glad that he seeks support for University Hospital Waterford, as do I. Since the two cath labs opened - they are operating 60 hours a week - the hospital is emulating the same service activity as the Cork centre, which has five cath labs and 168 hours scheduled. This is despite the fact the Herity report in 2015 indicated that there was no requirement for a second cath lab and that the emergency services should be taken out of Waterford.

I can extend that to our technological university. We have had no capital investment there whatsoever, beyond a land purchase and, as I pointed out to the Taoiseach, no funding to build a building. The engineering building is nowhere to be seen. I could see on television during the week three senior Ministers walking around DCU, smiling while they awarded €61 million in accommodation grants, with nothing done for the south-eastern regional university. There has been no extension of the borrowing framework, no looking at lecturers' contracts as promised, and nothing done by way of accepting the €350 million project plan that has been put forward by the president of the university.

In recent weeks, the Taoiseach produced his capital calculator to show how much money Fine Gael is putting back into people's pockets. I suggest he might look at a calculator to see how much it has taken out of the south-eastern region and how it has left us behind, because we are suffering inequity. I have worked very hard with the Taoiseach and the Government to try to address that but it is not happening at this point.

The Taoiseach: In terms of clarifying the record, I think I have done that already by correspondence. Like a lot of things, investment depends on how you count it, that is, whether you count the spend when it is actually spent, which often happens after the building has been built, or when it is announced or when it is under construction.

What the Deputy and I do not disagree on is that Waterford and the south east need more investment, and I can guarantee him that so long as this Government remains in office, and so long as there is no fundamental change in our economic and foreign policy, that will continue to be possible. That is why it is important this Government should remain in office. There has been considerable IDA investment in Waterford and the south east. As the Deputy pointed out, we established the long-promised university for the south east and that includes the purchase of the Waterford Crystal site in Waterford, which is very welcome. We will get the engineering building done, but the Deputy will be aware there are complications in the negotiations there.

Work has begun on the north quays development, which will transform the city of Waterford, opening up a whole new quarter. It even involves the moving of the train station, so it is a huge investment. There has also been considerable road investment in the south east, such as

the New Ross bypass and in Enniscorthy. In respect of Waterford Airport, we are keen to invest in that. The Minister, Deputy McGrath, visited it not too long ago. We made a commitment on funding. It turns out it is not enough. A further business case has been submitted for more funding and we are examining it with due haste.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Taoiseach and I spoke recently about the minimum wage increase. At the time, he said to me that, on the one hand, I was welcoming the wage increase, which I do, but that I also wanted protection for businesses that will be impacted by the wage increase and had asked what the Government could do to counteract it.

The issue has now come to the fore, given the Taoiseach has, I believe, received a letter from IBEC outlining its concerns about the additional costs his Government has set out. The letter highlights specific worries about the pace and scale of the Government increases in labour costs, including an increase in the minimum wage to €12.70 and changes to employer PRSI, statutory sick pay, pension auto-enrolment, work permits, salary thresholds and protective leave entitlements. IBEC estimates the Government's labour market policy will add €4 billion annually to the wage bill of Irish employers, leading to labour cost increases of 25% to 30% in the most impacted firms. According to an article on the RTÉ website, one third of new companies close within the first four years of their existence. It states that the post-Christmas period has seen a wave of restaurant closures in Ireland and that the Restaurant Association of Ireland, RAI, claims 280 of its members have closed in the past six months. I urge the Government to intervene in this.

I am an employer myself. I agreed with the minimum wage increase and all the employers I have spoken to also agreed with it, but it has created inflation in certain cases. In the hotel industry, the minimum wage was increased to €12.70, but people who were on €13 then wanted to go to €14.30 and there was a knock-on effect through all the wage increases on all hospitality sectors. In the case of one business whose owner I spoke to, which has seven employees, two of whom are part time, it amounts to an increase of €40,000 to its costs. The only way they can counteract that and pay the increase in the minimum wage, which they said the employees deserve, without increasing the price of their product is by going into their maintenance fund. They said that by going into their maintenance fund, if anything breaks down, they will have to close anyway. If they put the prices up, the same wage increase we are giving will actually be taken back in and means they will not be sustainable anymore. Representatives from one hotel I spoke to said this will actually cost them €400,000 extra this year. For a wedding or a major event, the increase will be by €4 per sitting. This means it will go to the same people who will have got a wage increase but will actually go back again into the Government's purse as it goes around in a circle.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I know many Deputies have done so, in Government parties and Opposition parties alike. We are a Government that supports enterprise and wants to make work pay. We believe it is possible to reward enterprise and reward work. However, there are interplays and balances that have to be struck, and we have to strike them right.

I acknowledge that the cost of doing business is very high and is rising. Some of that is down to pay. Much of it is down to energy. Some of it is down to the cost of supplies and materials. Some of it is Government-influenced, but the Government has no influence over much of it. We are helping businesses. More than a quarter of a billion euro will be injected into small businesses in the form of grants by the end of March. That is designed to help businesses with

cash flow, particularly at this very difficult time.

We are now seeing energy prices falling, which is very encouraging. I hope we will see interest rates falling throughout the course of this year as well. The increase in the minimum wage was recommended by the Low Pay Commission, and our plan is to bring the minimum wage up to the level of the living wage, which is approximately 60% of median earnings. We want to do that as soon as we possibly can. We acknowledge, however, that we have to monitor how this works out on the ground, because we have seen very big increases in the minimum wage in recent years. While it is not double, it is much higher than it was ten or 11 years ago. Despite a very big increase in the minimum wage, we have not seen unemployment rising. In fact, the reverse has happened. There are more people at work than ever before.

While businesses are opening and closing all the time, the number of closures at the moment is below the long-term average of 50 per 10,000. However, this is something we will have to monitor very closely, because there is no point in putting up somebody's wages if they then lose their job or have their hours cut. This is something we will have to monitor over the next couple of months and take account of when the Low Pay Commission makes its recommendation for next year, because there are other employment-related costs that are going to rise, such as pension contributions under auto-enrolment and the 0.1% increase in PRSI.

I take very seriously what businesses are saying. We acknowledge that the cost of doing business is high. We are helping, particularly with the quarter of a billion euro we will inject into small businesses over the next couple of months. The key thing we need to monitor is whether there is a fall-off in employment as a consequence of this increase and whether we will see businesses closing at a faster rate than they would on the long-term average. We are not seeing that yet, but we do need to look out for it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Most of the businesses that are closing are SMEs: small, local and medium enterprises. They are not international businesses. They are small, local enterprise businesses. What the Government could have done in the interim, which would have had an immediate effect, was to have reduced VAT back to 9% across the board. It was brought in for the interim before. It worked and it could work now until we find a solution.

I am a father and a grandfather. I listened to a man recently, as I have listened to many parents recently. They have four children and their fourth child is now leaving the country to set up their life in another country. They are following their brothers and sisters across the water. The young man said to his father, "Dad, I am sorry, I am going". He said he will never afford a house in this country, that he will live and work here but never have anything here. He said he will now follow his brothers and sisters to create a life. We have all seen people leaving this country in their youth, and then come home to set up their families and live here. He said that will no longer be the case. They are leaving and they are not coming home because they no longer see home as sustainable for them to raise their families into the future. They have to do it in another country because they cannot do it at home. I am asking the Taoiseach to intervene now, reduce the VAT rate to 9% now and protect our small businesses. The multinationals can protect themselves but our Irish local businesses need the Government's help and need it now.

The Taoiseach: Businesses, particularly small businesses, have received unprecedented support from Government over the past three or four years. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we helped pay the wages and the overheads. During the energy crisis, we helped with the energy bills through TBESS. We reduced VAT to 9% on a temporary basis-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It worked.

The Taoiseach: -----we brought in tax warehousing and we also have a new grant which businesses will receive in the next couple of months. The sad reality is that there are a number of businesses in the State which have only got by in the past couple of years because of that State support and some of those are not viable. That is a sad truth but one no Government can simply subsidise forever.

On the story the Deputy tells about somebody emigrating to set up their lives abroad, of course that happens. It happens all the time for all sorts of different reasons. Let us not forget that in each of the past seven years, the number of Irish citizens leaving has been less than the number of Irish citizens returning or has been roughly the same. There is this narrative that huge numbers of Irish people are abandoning the country for better lives abroad, but the truth is different.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: They are not coming home.

The Taoiseach: They are. The Deputy is entitled to his opinions, but he is not entitled to his own facts. The facts are that in the past three years, 80,000 Irish citizens left and went abroad for all sorts of different reasons. A total of 90,000 came back. That is a fact, Deputy.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Those are the statistics.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: When we find out how many are leaving this year, we will see it is much more.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is é sin deireadh leis na Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí. Bog-faimid ar aghaidh anois go dtí gnó na Dála don tseachtain seo. Under Standing Order 35, I call the Chief Whip-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, on a point of order, I ask the Taoiseach to correct the record. He said we did not mention Hamas in our Dáil motion. That is incorrect. We did and we referred to its acts on 7 October as an atrocity. Please correct the record.

The Taoiseach: I think the Deputy may be incorrect and we can check the record. I believe I said the Deputy's party only mentioned Hamas in the context of its crimes on 7 October which it says does not justify Israel's response.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are not having a debate on this issue now.

The Taoiseach: There is no condemnation.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Taoiseach said we did not condemn.

The Taoiseach: There is no call for the release of the hostages. There is no call for Hamas to cease fire. There is no call for that terrorist organisation to disarm.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Calling it an atrocity is a condemnation and the Taoiseach needs to present facts in this case.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is misinformation.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Misinformation.

23 January 2024

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Táimid ag bogadh ar aghaidh anois.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):
I move:

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Social Welfare (Liable Relatives and Child Maintenance) Bill 2023 Motion to Instruct the Committee (without debate)
- Motion re Conflict in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (to conclude within 147 mins)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Housing and Homeless Prevention, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements post European Council meeting of 14th-15th December, pursuant to Standing Order 124 (statements for 102 mins, followed by 20 mins Q&A, followed by Ministerial response for 5 mins)
- Motion re Tribunal of Inquiry into certain matters relating to the Complaints Processes in the Defence Forces (to conclude within 112 mins)
- Digital Services Bill 2023 (Report and Final Stages) (to be taken no earlier than 6 p.m. and to conclude within 60 mins)
- Gas (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Report and Final Stages) (if not previously concluded, to adjourn either at 9.14 p.m. or after 1 hr 30 mins, whichever is the later)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Gaza and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, selected by the Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on United Kingdom Import Controls (not to exceed 112 mins)
- Charities (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Second Stage) (if not previously concluded, to adjourn at 6.30 p.m. or after 2 hrs 56 mins, whichever is the later)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Children and Family Relationships (Amendment) Bill 2023.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

In relation to Tuesday'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) the Dáil may sit later than 10.32 p.m.; and

(ii) the time allotted to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for the Motion re Conflict in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business, namely, private members' business, Parliamentary Questions to the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence, and topical issues;

2. the proceedings on the Social Welfare (Liable Relatives and Child Maintenance) Bill 2023 Motion to Instruct the Committee shall be taken without debate; and

3. the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the Motion re Conflict in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory:

(i) the proceedings shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours and 27 minutes;

(ii) the speeches shall not exceed 137 minutes, and the arrangements for that time shall be in accordance with the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, and the Resolution of the Dáil of 20th September, 2023;

(iii) following the speeches, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(iv) members may share time.

In relation to Wednesday'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) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m., but shall in any event adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time;

(ii) the first item of Government business, namely, the Statements post European Council meeting of 14th-15th December, pursuant to Standing Order 124, shall be taken at the time when the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) would normally be taken, and the SOS shall be taken immediately following the statements; and

(iii) the weekly division time may be taken later than 8.45 p.m., and shall in any event be taken on the interruption or conclusion of proceedings on the Gas (Amendment) Bill 2023;

2. the Statements post European Council meeting of 14th-15th December, pursuant to Standing Order 124, shall not exceed 127 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(i) the statements shall not exceed 102 minutes, and the arrangements for that time shall be in accordance with those agreed by the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, and the Resolution of the Dáil of 20th September 2023;

(ii) following the statements, questions and answers shall be taken for 20 minutes;

(iii) on the conclusion of the questions and answers, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed five minutes; and

(iv) members may share time;

3. the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the Motion re Tribunal of Inquiry into certain matters relating to the Complaints Processes in the Defence Forces:

(i) the proceedings shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour and 52 minutes;

(ii) the speeches shall not exceed 102 minutes, and the arrangements for that time shall be in accordance with the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, and the Resolution of the Dáil of 20th September, 2023;

(iii) following the speeches, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(iv) members may share time;

4. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Digital Services Bill 2023 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after one hour by one question which shall be put from the Chair and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; and

5. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Gas (Amendment) Bill 2023 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 9.14 p.m. or after 1 hour and 30 minutes, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Wednesday.

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 extent that topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the interruption or conclusion of Government business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Children and Family Relationships (Amendment) Bill 2023, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the Statements on United Kingdom Import Controls shall not exceed 112 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(i) the statements shall not exceed 102 minutes, and the arrangements for that time shall be in accordance with the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, and the Resolution of the Dáil of 20th September, 2023;

(ii) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(iii) members may share time; and

3. the proceedings on Second Stage of the Charities (Amendment) Bill 2023 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 6.30 p.m. or after 2 hours and 56 minutes, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Thursday.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not agreed.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is not agreed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Whitmore.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. We need to see the plans of the Government on immigration and housing refugees. Each week we are told that they are just being worked on, but we need to see the facts, figures and timelines on this. There are more than 600 IPAS applicants who are currently on our streets who are facing sub-zero temperatures or storm after storm and we need to see the plan for how the Government will provide them with accommodation. We hear about reception and integration centres. Where are the plans for those? These have been talked about for two or three years now. When will the Government get its act together and come up with a feasible and deliverable plan to deal with this issue? We need statements from the Government on this as soon as possible.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Yesterday we saw a landmark ruling from the Supreme Court in the case of Johnny O'Meara. I commend the courage of Johnny O'Meara in challenging the inequality in law relating to cohabiting couples and to note that judgement. I also note that the Government is committed to passing legislative change to give effect to that ruling to ensure cohabitants in the tragic circumstances of Johnny O'Meara and his children will be covered by social protection measures. Will the Taoiseach give us a timeline for the bringing in of the necessary legislative measures? In particular, will the Government do this by way of amendments to the social welfare Bill currently going through the Oireachtas?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I welcome the decision of the Government, albeit belated, to concede to a debate on Gaza that we asked for. I object that the Government motion in this has only come out in the past 20 minutes or so and we have been given five minutes from now to put in amendments. This is completely unacceptable, especially given the failure of the Government to accede to the request of those concerned about Israel's genocide to actively and publicly support South Africa's action against Israel for genocide in Gaza.

I also express my concern about reports in the newspapers over recent days about comments made by the Ceann Comhairle to the effect that the left are somehow responsible for a rise in antisemitism. Those comments need to be clarified. It is completely baseless to suggest-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----the left who criticise Israel for apartheid are somehow guilty of antisemitism.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, we are on the business for the week. Moving on, on the topic of whether the business for the week is agreed, we will hear from Deputies McGrath,

Mac Lochlainn and Tóibín.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. On behalf of my colleagues in the Rural Independent Group, and Deputy O'Donoghue raised it already, we badly need a debate on the situation facing small businesses, especially food outlets. We had two restaurants on Main Street in Tipperary town, Prime 74 and Flanagan's Lane Restaurant, close in the past week. These were two excellent premises with excellent staff and excellent management. They were excellent family businesses. This is replicated up and down the county and all over the country. The Government might have a minimum wage and excellent bank holidays and this fanfare for extra sick pay, extra pensions and you name it, but the Small Firms Association, IBEC and everybody else is telling it that it is just not viable to stay in business. There is carbon tax, the cost of electricity and everything else. The Government is giving support, but this is a crisis. First of all, we need the VAT dealt with immediately. It must be reduced back to 9%. We need to look seriously at how difficult it is for a small business to operate and the onerous job it is for employers to fill out all this paperwork. All the schemes the Government has brought in are lovely, but they are not practical and they are killing initiative and small business.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: As the Taoiseach must know, the fishing and seafood industry in Ireland is in serious crisis. In recent days, leaders of the fishing industry have spoken out about their profound concern about how the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, has handled an offer from the Danish Government to transfer thousands of tons of mackerel to the Irish fishing industry. There is also the way the Government is handling negotiations at the moment on access for Iceland into Irish territorial waters. We have an industry in crisis. We need a Government fighting for the industry's future in Europe. Will the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, urgently come before the Dáil and make a statement clarifying his handling of both the Danish Government's offer and access for Iceland to Irish territorial waters?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We need to have a discussion about the Government's mismanagement of immigration policy. The absence of resources when it comes to accommodation is startling at the moment. The Government promised 700 rapid-build units back in June 2022. The majority of those have not been built. The Minister promised a community dividend of €53 million, but only €3 million has actually been spent. We now have this nebulous promise by the Government of more investment going into local communities and these accommodation centres. We need to get down to the detail of what exactly is going to happen so it can be delivered.

The Taoiseach: The issue of immigration and asylum is a very sensitive topic and one that needs to be dealt with sensitively in this House, so I reiterate my view and that of the Government that migration in the round has been a good thing for Ireland. We would not be able to run most of our public services without migrant workers. Many of the big companies that are here that pay billions in tax would not be here if it were not for access to talent from all over the world, and of course people coming from other parts of the world help to enrich our culture as a modern state.

On the particular issue of accommodating IP applicants, we are in an emergency situation. The number of people on the move in the world is at its highest level since the Second World War and the number of asylum seekers coming to Ireland is about the EU average. In previous years it was well below the EU average, but certainly it is not disproportionate to what other

EU countries are facing. So far this year there have been more than 1,000 people who came here to seek international protection alone, and it is only 23 January, and about 600 have no accommodation at all. In this emergency scenario we are doing the best we can to find any accommodation we can, with preference being given to women and children.

The medium-term plan is to reduce the number of arrivals by enforcing our rules, but we need to be realistic about the difference that will make. It might not be huge, but we need to enforce our rules and demonstrate they are being enforced. We will have bigger centres. There will be a small number around the country that people can be accommodated in while a decision on their case can be made more quickly. We will provide additional support for communities that have welcomed large numbers of Ukrainians and international protection applicants.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Taoiseach, we are on the Order of Business.

The Taoiseach: If I stick to that, I can do this very quickly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not mean to interrupt but I think there is a debate required on a lot of this.

The Taoiseach: In relation to the O'Meara case, we will need legislation on that. We are considering the judgment, which is about 160 pages in length. I should point out that the judgment was made on equality grounds. Sadly, the court confirmed that it does not see Mr. O'Meara's family as a family under our Constitution and nor can the State. That is another reason why we need to change the Constitution. I want to acknowledge the loss and bereavement he has suffered and I know that no payment from the State can make up for that loss but we will make the payment, provide refunds to others and change the practice going forward. That will require legislation and amendments to the Social Welfare Acts to recognise other cohabiting couples but that will not be straight forward. We will have to decide on things like how long the person is cohabiting, whether we treat cohabiting people with children differently and all of those complicated things. We will have to do it and work it out but it is all the more reason to pass the referendum.

On small businesses, we will be happy to have a debate on that next week during Private Member's time. I am also happy to pass on the request to the Minister for agriculture, Deputy McConalogue, on fishery negotiations.

Question, "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to," put and declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Oliver Bond flats in the inner city of Dublin are 90 years old. If you live in Oliver Bond you are likely to be living with damp and mould, in conditions that are unacceptable and unbelievable in 2024. A report published today reflects that people living in Oliver Bond flats have a higher likelihood of respiratory illnesses such as asthma. The report speculates strongly that this is a direct consequence of the very poor living conditions that exist. I have to say that I was not surprised at all to hear the outcome of this study. Anybody who deals with communities and families living in the blocks of flats right across Dublin city, Cork and elsewhere, will know that they have been allowed to go to rack and ruin and are desperately in need of regeneration. In my own area I can cite Ballybough House, Larkin House, O'Brien Hall, Kevin Barry House-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are way over time Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----Gardiner Street flats, and Dunne Street flats, all of which suffer from damp and mildew but there is no plan and no Government ambition to change these living conditions. What does the Taoiseach propose to do about this?

The Taoiseach: First, everyone should live in safe and healthy accommodation. Damp, mould and cold living conditions are not acceptable, particularly when it is State-provided accommodation. In relation to Oliver Bond, I am informed that Dublin City Council is working on a design in preparation for a Part 8 planning application for the regeneration of Oliver Bond flats, including blocks L, M and N. In the meantime, the council is making a number of interventions including the installation of mechanical ventilation units and the upgrading of windows.

I agree with the Deputy strongly on one point, that regeneration in the Dublin City Council area is far too slow. Senator Mary Seery Kearney has drawn my particular attention to a number of projects in Dublin 8 alongside Oliver Bond flats, for example Dolphin House and Donore Avenue flats, which are taking far too long. It was a specific item of discussion at the last Cabinet subcommittee on housing and it is something I intend to speak to the new city manager about.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Each year it is estimated that 14,000 women in Ireland experience pregnancy loss yet currently, as we know, there is no provision in law for any leave for women who experience an early miscarriage - a pregnancy loss before 24 weeks - or for employees who seek time off work to access reproductive healthcare treatments like IVF. We in the Labour Party brought forward a Private Member's Bill last Thursday to deal with that, to address that issue and to provide for reproductive health leave. We were very disappointed that the Government sought to put in a year-long stay on debate on that Bill. We will vote tomorrow night on that 12-month delaying amendment and because the House will likely not be sitting in a year's time, a year's delay amounts to ending any prospect of the Bill becoming law this year.

One of the reasons the Government put forward for delaying the Bill was that it needed to publish research commissioned by the Department of equality and completed by the UCC pregnancy loss research group last October. Today, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, confirmed to me that the report would be published this week. Will the Taoiseach reconsider that delaying amendment, given the report is now to be published this week?

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that early pregnancy loss and fertility treatments can be covered under the statutory sick pay scheme, which is new. It just requires a doctor's cert to that effect. However, I appreciate and am sympathetic to the calls for dedicated leave for the reasons outlined. Some employers offer it on a voluntary basis. To pick up on what many Deputies said earlier about rising costs and the rising difficulties businesses are having, the Government has introduced a lot of additional leave, including an extra public holiday, statutory sick pay, extended parental leave and domestic violence leave. Employers are saying to us, and it is not unreasonable for them to do so, that this is a significant amount of leave. They have to cover the cost of that and the replacement member of staff. We need to do the research and look at this in the round. I stand over the reforms made by the Government, including increasing the living wage, bringing in extra forms of leave and all of those things, but we have to make sure it does not impact negatively on employment.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Last week, we heard from Families for Reform of CAMHS about the predominantly problematic experience of the 850 families it represents. The Taoiseach will also be aware of the review of CAMHS carried out by the Mental Health Commission,

which produced a fairly damning report that made 49 recommendations. The overriding recommendation and requirement of its report was for the independent regulation of CAMHS. We cannot continue with the kind of dysfunction we have seen in CAMHS over recent years. Has the Government considered those recommendations, in particular, the recommendation for the independent regulation of CAMHS by the Mental Health Commission? Has it been discussed with the Minister for Health? Is the Government disposed to acceding to that recommendation, which urgently needs to be implemented?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The HSE and I met separately with Families for Reform of CAMHS in September and October last year to discuss HSE youth mental healthcare and specialist CAMHS services, including linkages with autism and intellectual disability services. Along with the Department of Health and the HSE, I will continue to liaise with that organisation as appropriate. As the Deputy knows, access to CAMHS services is in line with CAMHS operational guidelines, also known as the COG, which applies to all staff working in CAMHS. I have engaged with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, regarding the Mental Health Commission's recommendations. We are working through its asks at present. The regulation of CAMHS is all contingent, as the Deputy knows, on the mental health Bill that will come before the House very shortly. It is priority legislation for the nine weeks of this Dáil term and will have priority printing in the second session.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Over the past number of months across Europe we have seen repression and criminalisation of pro-Palestinian protestors. In Germany, for example, there have been severe police crackdowns and a banning of Palestine solidarity protests on the wrong basis that they are antisemitic. In Britain, we have seen the potential criminalisation of the carrying of flags and of chants, and there is now a report that urges a ban on pro-Palestinian marches. Unfortunately, it looks like some of the same is now coming to Ireland. Yesterday, a Palestinian activist was fined €1,000 simply for attending a protest at the Israeli embassy. He was not accused of doing anything beyond that, yet he was fined €1,000. It stands in very stark contrast to the kid gloves with which the State treats the actions of far-right agitators. We have now had more than 20 arson attacks and not a single arrest. Will the Government defend the right of people to protest, including pro-Palestinian protests?

The Taoiseach: The Government defends the right of people to protest and do so peacefully. That includes pro-Palestinian protests, and it includes protests against antisemitism and protests against terrorism. I do not know the details of the case raised by the Deputy. There may be more to it than I know or the Deputy knows. We have no plans to bring in any restrictions on pro-Palestine protests.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tara Mines is the biggest lead and zinc mine in Europe. It is one of the largest employers in Meath and its closure has been one of the biggest economic blows to the east midlands area for a long period of time. A key element of the closure was the fact that electricity prices in this country are the highest in Europe. Tara Mines management has given a plan to workers. That plan is a race to the bottom for income and terms and conditions. It seeks more than 200 redundancies and possibly reduces the working month to a three-week month for workers. Zinc in Meath is an Irish national resource. Tara Mines has made a handsome profit over the years from that resource and from the work of its staff over that period of time. Yet, the workers are now faced with a choice between the full closure of the mine or damaging and painful concessions at Tara Mines. What material actions has the Taoiseach taken in the last seven months to protect the workers in Tara Mines?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I do not believe this is just about electricity prices, which as the Deputy will know are now falling and falling rapidly for businesses. It is also about lead and zinc prices, which ultimately determine how much the company gets for what it produces. The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Simon Coveney and his team, alongside our enterprise agencies, have been engaging with the company to see what financial and other support the Government could put in place for the company to reopen the mine, which is the objective we want to achieve, and then to consider the Tara deep resource, which would give the mine sustainability for decades.

The supports that are available to the workers are those that are available for anyone who has lost their job. They include training and education, help setting up a business, and social welfare. We are improving those. The Deputy will be aware of the plans of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to bring in pay-related benefits precisely to recognise people like the Tara Mines workers who have been paying into the PRSI system for years and should get a higher level of jobseeker's benefit if they need it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The N24 upgrade from Cahir, at the Cloghabreedy junction, through County Kilkenny and on to Waterford city is at design stage and now it is at stage 2. Engagement is taking place with householders and farmers along the route. There is a proposal that up to seven houses and family homes may be demolished. The road is very badly needed but there is now confusion and no clarity from the Department or TII. It is supposed to be a single carriageway route. It just beggars belief that in this day and age in 2024, they would design, go to all this fuss, upset all the landowners and householders with debates and consultants and so on, and contemplate building a single carriageway road. We must engage in forward planning and have a decent motorway or dual carriageway, above all with a safety barrier in the middle. We have seen the slaughter on our roads. Other groups have said there will be more slaughter unless we get these roads developed. The Green Party is wagging the tail again here by having a mix of the old road and a new single carriageway. It is a waste of money and a backward step.

The Taoiseach: I will have to seek an update from TII on this. I do not have the details to hand. We are continuing a considerable investment in our roads. The focus, of course, is on maintaining and strengthening existing roads, on safety, on international commitments, and on bypasses of towns in particular.

Deputy Joan Collins: Last week I received the following email:

My mother has been a type 2 insulin-dependent patient for over 40 years. She was changed over to a Dexcom system nearly two years ago. This system enables patients to manage control over their diabetes through smart technology and eliminates the need for over five finger pricks per day. This also allowed us to share blood sugar readings in real time with a diabetic team. As my mother is approaching 74 with onset memory issues this system has effectively allowed us, her family, to take control of her readings and help us manage her condition alongside her. The diabetic clinic in St. James's Hospital where my mother attends was informed in January that the HSE are no longer funding Dexcom system for type 2 patients.

I clarified the matter again this morning with this young woman. She said she has received clarification that this is not available for new patients, although patients who have been on it for a year will remain on it. Why is this happening?

3 o'clock

Why are new patients not getting access to this valuable service?

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I thank the Deputy. If she provides me with the details I will look into the matter and revert to the Department and the HSE in respect of it. What I would say to those who are managing diabetes is that there is ongoing significant and important investment. We are all aware that is one of the chronic disease management pathways in respect of which GPs are being supported. We are investing this year in creating a diabetes patient register. The Deputy will be aware that we are rolling out a new service for gestational diabetes. She should rest assured that diabetes, as a chronic condition, is something in which the State is investing significantly in order to support patients managing at home. If the Deputy provides the details relating to the case in question, I will revert to her directly.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Once again I bring to the attention of the House the ongoing situation in family law in this country whereby a procedure imported from the United States continues to be applied to the extent that fathers, mothers and their children are being unbelievably abused in a way I have never seen before. This abuse is continuing. Is it intended to carry out an interim inquiry into the procedure and how a means might be found to bring it to an end?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Durkan for raising this important issue again. I will have to speak to the Minister for Justice about it. Either a review or a report was done but not an inquiry. I will follow up on the matter with the Deputy directly.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am aware of a priest who has been living in Ireland for ten years. He is working and plays an essential role in the community. He comes from a foreign country and is still awaiting citizenship. Yesterday, I was told by the Department that it could take up to 19 months for his application to be dealt with. What is the reason for the delay? I cannot understand how there can be a delay of this length. Is the Department short-staffed? What can be done? As stated, the priest in question is working and playing an important part in our community. I will have to go back to him and tell him he will be waiting at least 19 months or more for his application to be dealt with. This needs to be addressed.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. If she passes me the details, I will check the matter out with the Minister, Deputy McEntee. Straightforward cases should not take that long. If somebody comes to the country legally and is working, making a contribution and paying their taxes, usually that person's case can be decided within months, and certainly less than 19 months in my experience. Sometimes there can be complicating factors because it is necessary to check with the country a person has come from. There are also other checks that have to be carried out. Perhaps there is a reason for the delay in this case, and perhaps it is not a good one. If the Deputy passes me on the details, I will follow up on the matter.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Last February, it was confirmed to me by the Minister with responsibility for housing that Cork City Council was considering a regeneration park for the Tarry Path in Mayfield. In December, it was confirmed to me that there has been no update on this. The Mayfield area is in desperate need of regeneration. We have heard today about the impact on people of mould and damp in Oliver Bond House in Dublin. The same is true in Cork in areas such as Mayfield, Knocknaheeny, Noonan's Road and Baker's Road. They are in desperate need of regeneration. The first time that Knocknaheeny regeneration was mentioned in the Dáil was on 14 February 2002. I do not want to be here in 22 years' time speaking about the

regeneration of Mayfield and other areas in the same way I am speaking about Knocknaheeny today. Will the Taoiseach give a commitment and an update to the Dáil regarding the regeneration of Mayfield and the other areas to which I refer?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy Gould. I fully understand his earnestness in terms of the regeneration projects in Cork. He specifically name-checked Mayfield and Knocknaheeny. I will follow up with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Department to find out exactly what is going on and we will give the Deputy a written response.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: One in three patients on hospital trolleys in this country is attending University Hospital Limerick. That means there are more people on trolleys in Limerick than in all of the Dublin hospitals combined. This has given rise to conditions in the hospital that are Dickensian and inhumane from the point of view of patients and staff. There is a block under construction at the hospital. When does the Taoiseach expect it to become operational? How many new beds will be provided in this block? Some of the beds being provided there will only replace beds that are being decommissioned. When will the next planned phase be operational? When will the surgical hub, which is designed to alleviate some of this situation, become operational?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We are very aware of the ongoing situation in Limerick in terms of the number of patients on trolleys. It is important to note that the chief executive expedited the appointment of the regional executive officer. I know first hand that she is on the ground and that things are moving better. I have spoken to her about the improved patient flow. One of the things people will now see in daily reporting is fewer patients on trolleys in the emergency department and more patients up the house in the wards. That is still not what we want, but it is a less unsafe situation than patients waiting too long in the emergency department.

As the Deputy will be aware, we have 96 beds under construction. I will get the Deputy the exact completion date for those. Critically, we have also started the enabling works on the second 96-bed block.

I am reserving the position in terms of replacement versus net beds. At the moment, we are in the business of adding beds. There may be some beds that we need to replace because they physically have to be taken out for some reason, but my strong preference is for additional beds rather than replacement ones.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister, but we are over time.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: What about the surgical hub?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Today, we read that new house prices are believed to have peaked at levels like €310,000 in the midlands and €464,000 in Dublin. It is true that, with the assistance of Government schemes, these can now be purchased using mortgages of under €300,000. However, because these schemes do not allow buyers to express advance interest in being purchasers under the affordable purchase schemes, there is no register of likely buyers and developers of multi-unit developments often feel it too risky to put those homes up for sale. In my constituency, there is a pipeline of 3,700 affordable homes on public lands, but only 10% of those are likely to be for affordable purchase. The rest will be cost rental. We can change that

if we allow a pipeline of potential purchasers to be identified in advance.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Deputy for his question. It is a matter that he has raised previously. I will make a number of points. Under the local authority affordable purchase scheme, local authorities are involved with developers in building homes and seek expressions of interest for them from the public.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Once they are built.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: No, before they are built. Extending the first home scheme so that people can express an upfront interest in availing of it needs to be considered. I will take this matter up directly with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and our Department.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time, but there are a number of Deputies remaining. I ask for their co-operation in sticking to the time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The fishing industry was mentioned. It has been brought to my attention that the Minister for agriculture was offered a quota from the Danes of 3,000 tonnes of fish, but the Minister seems to have done the reverse of the loaves and fishes miracle and returned to Ireland with 1,500 tonnes of fish. It seems that the Minister is also in negotiations with Iceland about allowing its fishing boats into Irish waters. Right now fishermen in Ireland are becoming an endangered species and it is increasingly unlikely to see fishing trawlers in Irish ports. When will the Government stand up for fishermen?

The Taoiseach: Thanks, Deputy. I am going to have to ask the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, to come back to him directly on that particular query, but this is an issue that I have taken an interest in personally. I have met the fishing organisations a few times. I think we had a good outcome in relation to mackerel not too long ago. On this particular negotiation, though, I am not across the detail, so I will have to ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy and to me with further information.

Deputy Patrick Costello: I attended this morning's launch in the Oliver Bond flats of the report into respiratory health. It is disgraceful that someone living in the Oliver Bond flats has double the likelihood of suffering a respiratory illness. Promises have been made about regeneration and there has been plan after plan, yet still nothing happens in terms of regeneration. It is not good enough that Dublin City Council has plans. The Department needs to start leaning on Dublin City Council to make sure these things can happen and to make sure the respiratory health of children growing up in Oliver Bond is not adversely affected as it is to the disgraceful levels seen in this report.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Patrick Costello: We need to step up and ensure the promises and plans are actually delivered.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I concur with him. Regeneration is happening in Dublin city. It is, of course, a matter for Dublin City Council primarily, but it is not happening fast enough. It is not just the Oliver Bond complex. It is also Dolphin House, Donore Avenue and so many other projects that seem to take an inordinate amount of time to progress. Even the O'Devaney Gardens project, which at least is now happening, is happening much slower than anyone would have anticipated. This is something we discussed at the housing subcommittee

and it is something that I know the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, will raise directly with the new CEO of Dublin City Council.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I wish to raise the issue of driver test waiting times. I got figures recently in response to a parliamentary question and there is a waiting time of 24 weeks in the Birr test centre, 25 weeks in Portlaoise and 43 weeks in Kilkenny city. This is according to the figures I got. It is a scandalous delay. I have taken up this matter before with the Minister. It is particularly affecting young drivers in rural areas who are trying to get to work where there is no bus service early in the morning or no Local Link. The Road Safety Authority, RSA, did have a recruitment campaign last summer for 75 testers but it only got 36 testers. That is fair enough. Meanwhile, nine testers on contract are being let go on 8 February. One of those is in the Portlaoise centre. The RSA has a service level agreement with the Department, as I understand it, that the average time is supposed to be ten weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask the Taoiseach to get the Minister to take a hands on approach with this issue and to try to get it addressed with the RSA.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I know this is a priority for the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers. From talking to my own Deputies and going around the country, I know the delays in getting a driver test are hugely frustrating, especially for young people and those who need the car to get to work or to college. We are hiring more testers and we believe this will help us to get on top of the backlog and improve the situation. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, to come back directly to the Deputy with some more information on this matter.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It needs a push. It needs action.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I understand from senior people in medicine that there is a need to increase the number of interns and training scheme doctors nationally. Apparently, the vast majority of level 3 hospitals have interns but Cavan-Monaghan hospital, despite promises, has not been facilitated with trainees. Without trainees, this hospital will have difficulty in recruiting and retaining Irish-trained doctors on qualification as they will not have the experience of working there previously. Over the years, management and staff at all levels have worked hard in the hospital to expand considerably the range of health services provided locally. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, on his visits to Cavan, saw at first-hand the successful roll out of some of those services. I understand that Cavan-Monaghan hospital is regarded as having excellent training opportunities across a range of specialties. The hospital has the personnel and facilities to provide appropriate training for such doctors. The needs of smaller-scale hospitals must be addressed and would help the better delivery of health services throughout the country.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I acknowledge that he has raised this with me previously to seek additional interns or, indeed, an intern allocation for this year. I have looked into the matter. The good news, as the Deputy will be aware, is that Cavan-Monaghan hospital has had a very significant increase in budget, in staffing and in physical capacity and infrastructure. The Deputy should rest assured that the Government will continue to invest in Cavan and Monaghan hospitals. I have asked the Department to revert to me in terms of the allocation of medical interns for this year. We now have a record number of hospital consultants in the country and a record number of non-consultant hospital doctors,

NCHDs, as well. We are looking into this to see what can be done for Cavan-Monaghan in terms of medical internship deployment for the next round.

Deputy Michael Collins: The hospitality sector in Ireland is under huge pressure. Closures of restaurants, pubs and cafes are happening at an alarming rate as we speak. More than 280 of these businesses have closed in the last number of months and records show that 48 closed in November 2023. I am inundated with businesses throughout west Cork and our country contacting me to tell me they are on the verge of closure with higher supplier costs and the value added tax, VAT, rate increase to 13.5%, which is the third highest hospitality rate in Europe and has taken them over the edge. The Government is talking about making changes to the debt warehouse scheme, but this is another nightmare that these businesses have not even factored in yet. To save these businesses and jobs, which are haemorrhaging this very day, will the Government accept that it got it seriously wrong and revert back to the 9% rate of VAT immediately and announce a rescue package for the thousands of struggling businesses all over the country?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. As I think I said earlier in reply to another Deputy, the Government appreciates that a lot of businesses are under pressure from rising costs, particularly those in the hospitality sector. There is help on the way in terms of a €250 million in grants that the Government will be pumping into small businesses before the end of March to help with bills and cash flow. The debt warehousing scheme remains in place. Also, we are seeing energy prices falling for business, which is encouraging too.

But I do need to be straight about this. We have a lot of businesses that in the last three or four years have become largely dependent on Government support, whether that was in the context of Covid-19 when we helped to pay the wages and the overheads, the temporary business energy support scheme, TBESS, when we helped to pay the energy bills or the temporary low VAT rate of 9%. These things cannot go on forever. We are going to monitor the situation very carefully because we will have to see if there is a fall in employment, which we will have to respond to, or if the number of business closures is above the long-term trend average, which is 50 per 10,000.

Social Welfare (Liable Relatives and Child Maintenance) Bill 2023: Motion to Instruct Committee

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I move:

That it be an instruction to the Select Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands on the Social Welfare (Liable Relatives and Child Maintenance) Bill 2023, that pursuant to Standing Order 187, the Committee has power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill in order to adjust the supports provided to Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection who are resident in designated accommodation centres and to make other consequential amendments required to take account of the changes above.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Economic Policy

1. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach to report on his Department's new publication entitled Government Response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2023. [53909/23]

2. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach to report on his Department's new publication entitled Government Response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2023. [53912/23]

3. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Government's response to the annual recommendations of the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, which was published by his Department on 29 November 2023. [54689/23]

4. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Government's response to the annual recommendations of the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, which was published by his Department on 29 November 2023. [54692/23]

5. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach to report on his Department's new publication entitled Government Response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2023. [55232/23]

6. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach to report on his Department's new publication entitled Government Response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2023. [55337/23]

7. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach to report on his Department's new publication entitled Government Response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2023. [55422/23]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos 1 to 7, inclusive, together.

The National Competitiveness and Productivity Council published its annual competitiveness challenge report in September 2023. The council's report outlined 19 priority recommendations across a broad range of areas for Government consideration. These include enabling stronger productivity growth through research, development and innovation; reducing the cost of doing business in Ireland; accelerating progress on the usage and generation of energy in line with our climate targets; and significantly improving planning, development and the delivery of infrastructure.

On 29 November last year, the Government published a comprehensive formal response to the council's recommendations. This is the fourth year in which a formal response was issued by the Government to the competitiveness challenge report. This response was co-ordinated by my Department, drawing together material from all relevant Departments. In its response, the Government welcomed the advice and views of the council and agreed on the importance and relevance of its recommendations to Ireland's continuing competitiveness. The response outlines specific actions underway across different Departments in answer to each of the recommendations of the council. These include, for example, a national industrial strategy for offshore wind to be published in the first half of the year; more efficiency and certainty in the planning system through the enactment of the Planning and Development Bill 2023; the provision of additional resources to An Bord Pleanála and local authorities; greater use of modern methods of construction, MMC, in the construction of housing; an updated Pathways to Work

strategy to be published shortly reflecting current labour market challenges; and stronger pathways from schools into further education and training and apprenticeships. These are just a few examples of actions the Government is taking to ensure continued improvements in the competitiveness and productivity of the Irish economy in the years ahead.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are several contributors, so they have up to one minute. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Contrary to mainstream economic theory, all wealth in our society is generated by workers. It is very obvious now that we are chronically short of the skills and workers we need in a whole range of areas, including construction, the health service, teaching, bus drivers and hospitality; you name it. Of course, the reason we are short is that it is unaffordable for tens of thousands of people who are qualified in the professions and trades to live here because housing is completely unaffordable. This has been confirmed again today by the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, SCSi, highlighting the affordability gap for ordinary workers. As a result, tens of thousands of skilled workers, people who are leaving college or who have qualified in the trades, are leaving the country when we desperately need them. What is the Taoiseach going to do to make housing affordable? Does he agree with our proposal that, under the Planning and Development Bill 2023, a minimum of 50% of all new housing should be designated as being social or affordable?

Deputy Paul Murphy: At the weekend, it was reported that the Government is considering the introduction of an Internet tax, that is, a tax of €10 to €15 which will apply to everybody's broadband bills, to replace the TV licence fee. At a rate of €15, that would mean €180 for practically every household in the country. Broadband is not some luxury; it is a necessity. Such a tax would be extremely unjust and regressive. The poorest household in the country would be forced to pay the same as the richest. There have been some murmurs in the media since then suggesting that the Government is not going to do this. Will the Taoiseach give us a guarantee that the Government will not attempt to introduce an Internet tax? Will he go further and promise to get rid of the regressive tax currently in place, namely, the TV licence fee, which approximately 50% of the population is currently boycotting? Instead of the licence fee, we need a big tech tax on social media giants to fund proper public service broadcasting.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I will ask the Taoiseach about competitiveness and the great struggle many small local businesses right across the country are experiencing in that regard. I refer particularly to businesses in the hospitality sector that provide many younger people with their first jobs, that sponsor community events and that employ a great many people. These are often family run enterprises. I am talking about cafes, pubs, shops and restaurants, many of which are under phenomenal pressure and having to close their doors. This is about more than the warehousing of taxes, increased wages and the changes to VAT. A perfect storm of a range of different issues is coming together and putting these businesses under pressure. Many of the LEOs do not have direction on the increased cost of business grant that was to be available and have not made it available. Will the Taoiseach give us an outline of how we are going to meet those challenges for those businesses?

Deputy Mick Barry: The Minister of State, Deputy Neale Richmond, met the employers' organisation Nursing Homes Ireland earlier this month and agreed to its request to defer increases to minimum pay rates for healthcare assistants and home care workers from outside of the European Economic Area who hold work permits. This concession to employers was made despite nursing homes being increasingly owned by real estate investment trusts and operated

by separate companies which are increasingly financed, at least in part, by means of private equity, according to the ESRI. The Minister of State did not meet with the representative body for the healthcare assistants, Migrant Nurses Ireland, despite its request for a meeting. He has now agreed to such a meeting this Thursday but this is after the announcement of the deferral. Non-EEA healthcare assistants, many of whom come from India, perform vital and stressful work in our nursing homes. They are isolated because their pay rates do not meet the threshold needed to bring their families with them. The Minister of State's decision to defer the pay increase is a concession to the owners, many of whom are very wealthy, and an insult to these workers, all of whom are low paid. How on earth can the Taoiseach justify that?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Time and again, the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council has warned that the lack of affordable housing is a key risk to the economy. It is absolutely infuriating for individuals and families who work hard to save up to buy homes to see vulture funds swooping in to snatch them up. In Belcamp Manor in Balgriffin, 85% of the housing estate has been bought by the investment arm of Deutsche Bank, an €800 billion fund. Mouthwatering rents of €3,175 are now being sought for these homes. The Minister with responsibility for housing, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has conceded that the 10% stamp duty on bulk purchases is not working and is going to be reviewed. Why is the Government not supporting the proposal from the Social Democrats for a 100% rate of stamp duty on bulk purchases in order to effectively ban investment funds from buying up homes? What level is the Government going to set stamp duty on bulk purchases at?

Deputy Peadar Kirby: There is an alarming increase in the number of small businesses being forced to close. The owners of these businesses, who have invested blood, sweat and tears to make them function, are being hammered with massive costs. In fact, we have a two-tier economy. We have a very strong foreign direct investment sector but a comparatively weak indigenous business sector. The businesses to which I refer are being hit by rip-off Ireland, which is made worse by the cost-of-living crisis. Many of them, especially restaurants, were hammered during Covid. In addition, the Government's policy on migrant accommodation relies too heavily on the hospitality sector. I ask the Taoiseach to consider what I believe to be the solution, which is to split the hospitality sector. In that sector, there are extremely large hotels that are making very big profits. These could be separated from small cafes, restaurants and other businesses, which would comprise a different sector that would be subject to a different VAT rate of 9%. Will the Taoiseach consider that proposal?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Taoiseach spoke about the many new pathways to education that provide people with necessary skill sets. While there are substantial deficits as regards the numbers we want trained in the traditional trades, there are also *nouveau* apprenticeships relating to cybersecurity, robotics and so on. There is great work being done in my constituency by Drogheda Institute of Further Education, Ó Fiaich Institute of Further Education and the Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre of Excellence. We want to see more of that. We know how necessary and important the big tech sector is and that we need to deal with the issues connected to the Digital Services Bill, but what is the State's policy on utilising artificial intelligence and addressing the dangers relating to it? How can we develop the courses and training that will be necessary to get the best of that world and to deal with any issues that arise and dangers that exist?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their questions. Deputy Boyd Barrett is quite right to say that wealth is generated by workers, but there are different forms of workers and different forms of wealth. A lot of wealth is generated by innovation and creating new things. We

need to always bear that in mind. There is a lot of research showing that 75% of all new global growth in recent decades has been driven by innovation, new inventions and entrepreneurship, that is, not by people doing the same things, but by people doing new things.

On the issue of skilled people leaving the country, Deputy Boyd Barrett is absolutely correct; there are skilled people leaving the country for lots of different reasons. There are way more skilled people coming into the country every year. There is net migration of skilled people into Ireland and that has been the case for a very long time. As I pointed out earlier, even if it is narrowed down to just Irish citizens, 80,000 left in the past three years but 90,000 returned. Notwithstanding the high cost of housing and the high cost of living, skilled people are pouring into this country because of the jobs that are available and more Irish citizens are returning to the country than are leaving. These are just the facts.

On what we can do to make housing more affordable, increasing incomes is a big part. It is the ratio of incomes to house prices that matters the most. The help-to-buy scheme helps great numbers of people to get their deposit for their first home. The derelict properties grants help a lot too. It is good to see dereliction now falling. The first home scheme makes a big difference in closing the affordability gap. There is also the construction of much more social housing because social housing benefits everyone, not just those who are taken off the housing list as a result of getting homes. It also helps to bring down the cost of housing generally and makes more places available to rent.

I took a look at the SCSi report that is being reported on today. Unfortunately, I believe its findings have been misreported. I can understand why people misunderstood it. The SCSi specifically states that the first home scheme is not included in its calculations. That would close the affordability gap. Indeed, it would eliminate it in many cases. It only applies to three-bedroom new semi-detached homes. Most people do not buy three-bedroom new semi-detached homes. Most people buy homes that are not new and most first-time buyers tend to buy two-bedroom, rather than three-bedroom, properties. As is often the case with these reports, it has been incorrectly reported by elements of the media and then incorrectly quoted by politicians, which is regrettable but happens very regularly.

As regards Deputy Murphy's comments, we are not planning to introduce an Internet tax. That was one option of many considered by the working group. The disadvantages were clear. It would not just be a 1% or 2% levy, but would have to be €10 or €15 a month, which would be too high, and there would be huge difficulties in applying exemptions, which we currently apply to people on very low incomes and to pensioners, for example. It did not jump out of the report as a good option. Rather, it jumped out of the report as a not-very-good option, but it is always important to consider all options.

As regards Deputy Moynihan's comments, as I acknowledged earlier, the cost of doing business is very high and it is rising, particularly for the hospitality sector and very labour-intensive sectors, such as retail, for example. We are seeing many cafés and restaurants closing. There are many of them opening, too, and a lot that are very difficult to get into, have a lot of business and are very busy. We are not seeing any evidence yet of employment levels falling in the hospitality sector but we need to monitor and watch out for that very closely. As I have said before, there is no point putting up people's wages if the net result is they lose their job or have their hours cut. We are not seeing much evidence of that yet.

In terms of businesses struggling, help is on the way. A quarter of a million euro will be

injected into small businesses between now and the end of March to help them with their costs. The tax warehousing scheme remains in place, but tax cannot be withheld forever. Businesses do have to pay their taxes. Members should bear in mind that some of that tax is PAYE, money that people earned a year or two ago that has not yet been paid to Revenue. In addition, we are seeing energy costs falling, which is encouraging.

As regards VAT rates, for most of the past 30 years the VAT rate for hospitality has been between 12.5% and 13.5%. On a temporary basis, it was reduced to 9% after the financial crash and during Covid. In the run-up to the budget, we considered separating accommodation from food service. That is technically possible. It would take time to implement but the cost, unfortunately, ran into hundreds of millions of euro and, for that reason, a decision was made not to proceed with it.

As regards Belcamp Manor, just like Deputy O’Callaghan and everybody else in the House, I do not like to see investment funds buying up family homes. We changed the law in 2021 to prevent that from happening. This particular permission was granted in 2019, two years before the law changed. Stamp duty is currently 10%. Clearly that did not deter the investment fund in this case from buying these homes. Sinn Féin is saying it should be 17% and the Social Democrats are saying 100%. That is not the way you do tax policy. We need to examine this properly-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Just ban them.

The Taoiseach: -----work out what the effective amount would be and make sure we are very careful about any unintended consequences, which often happen in tax policy.

Artificial intelligence is a really important topic to which we need to give a lot of consideration. It was the main topic of discussion in Davos last week. It is a powerful technology with potentially enormous benefits for society and the economy, but one that has some risks too. My only regret is that it is described as artificial intelligence. That gives people the impression it is something it is not. It is not anything approaching human intelligence. These are machines that can do calculations very fast.

Deputy Mick Barry: What about the question on healthcare assistance?

The Taoiseach: I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, to revert to the Deputy on that issue.

Covid-19 Pandemic

8. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the terms of reference for the inquiry into Covid-19 in Ireland will be produced. [55131/23]

9. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the terms of reference for the inquiry into Covid-19 in Ireland will be produced. [56544/23]

10. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach his views on the need for an inquiry into the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland. [2773/24]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 to 10, inclusive, together.

A comprehensive evaluation of how the country managed Covid-19 will provide an opportunity to learn lessons from our experiences in dealing with the pandemic. It will include a review of the whole-of-government response to the pandemic and how we might do better and be in a stronger position if another pandemic or other similar event were to occur. It will include a consideration of the health service response, covering hospitals, the community and nursing homes, along with the wider economic and social response.

It is intended to have a public element to hear the lived experiences of all of society. The review should be undertaken by those independent of the national response and with relevant expertise. A consultation with Opposition parties has been scheduled for this week and I intend to bring the terms of reference to Government shortly thereafter.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I have received some incredible answers from different Ministers to parliamentary questions in respect of what happened during Covid. The Minister for Health confirmed to me that there were 10% fewer cancers diagnosed in 2020 than would have been expected for that year by the National Cancer Registry Ireland. That is an alarming revelation. In 2020, 60,000 fewer women were screened by CervicalCheck than were screened in the previous year. This is because the Government in part shut down cancer screening. There were 30% fewer women diagnosed with cancer of the cervix in 2020 compared with 2019.

Aontú was the only political party in the Dáil at the time pushing back against the policy of the Government to reduce cancer services. During that time, Ireland was the only country in the whole of Europe to shut down the building of homes. In terms of child experiences in this country, there has been an enormous spike in the number of children who have been referred to the likes of Tusla and to State care in the past couple of years. People within that sector have told me there is absolutely no doubt that the actions taken by the Government in the context of how children were treated during Covid have left children in a very precarious situation.

Any time the Government refers to its review or investigation into the Covid time, the first thing it talks about is the need to avoid a blame game. It sounds like the Government is using language of trying to prevent accountability in that regard. We need a proper open public investigation into the decisions that were made and the outcomes they had on people. People suffered significantly from many of the decisions, some of which were not based on science relating to protection of people.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Covid-19 pandemic was a worldwide catastrophe that no one could have anticipated. It brought worry, isolation and loss that will stay with us for some time to come. Some families will never recover. Some lost their loved ones who lay stranded in a nursing home and had to say goodbye through a window or over the phone. It was a cruel and hard time. Most of us rallied and it brought out the best of us. Front-line workers rose to the challenge in a magnificent way. Teachers pivoted to online classrooms and neighbours minded each other. Now we need to take the learning from what was a desperately dark time.

Nearly 12 months ago, Mary Lou McDonald and David Cullinane wrote to the Taoiseach asking for the terms of reference of a Covid inquiry. They heard nothing in response. A meeting with Opposition leaders in December was cancelled. Finally, a meeting is to happen later this week. The Taoiseach has committed to engaging not only with political leaders but also with those who showed bravery, steadfastness and creativity through the Covid crisis. Did he speak to Care Champions, which has been such a strong voice for those who lost family members? Did he speak to the Irish Association of Social Workers, Safeguarding Ireland and

representatives of the healthcare trade unions? They must have their say in shaping this inquiry. I have spoken before on the need for a mechanism for families who lost loved ones in places such as Dealgan House.

A Covid inquiry should not be a witch-hunt. It should acknowledge the hard decisions that had to be taken. It should be conscious and respectful of the efforts of all front-line workers and, most important, should acknowledge the trauma still felt by some.

Deputy Paul Murphy: My question is simple. Will long Covid be included in the terms of reference of the Covid inquiry? It is clearly important that if we are to come to a balanced assessment of mistakes that were made and so on, we do not look just at the short term but also at the long-term implications for hundreds of thousands of people, such as illness, isolation and inability to work. In that regard, the economic impacts alone are severe.

According to the World Health Organization, one in ten Covid infections results in long Covid. There are 350,000 people in Ireland suffering from long Covid. The Government has utterly failed to organise proper healthcare services for long Covid, such as basic training for GPs to properly diagnose and manage it. It is not recognised as a disability for the purposes of social welfare. The Government continues to fail to warn the public about the ongoing dangers of contracting Covid through a public information campaign. Again, Taoiseach, it is a very simple question. Will long Covid be included in the terms of reference of the inquiry?

Deputy Mick Barry: Some 24 residents died in a 51-bed nursing home at Ballynoe in Cork during the Covid emergency. They were just some of the more than 1,500 people who died in nursing homes during those times. Families and loved ones have many questions they want answered about the care that was and, in some cases, was not given in the homes. Ireland's Covid inquiry is due to be set up in the near future. Majella Beattie of Care Champions told Shannonside radio that older people and people in care were often seen through a medical lens rather than being seen as human beings with thoughts and being able to make choice and having human rights. They were never given that. Where rights were given in other countries, we continued with extreme restrictions on older people. Care Champions are calling for a human rights expert to be on the panel that looks at what happened in our nursing homes and how we go forward from here. Will the Taoiseach agree to this request?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There are a lot of issues that will have to be dealt with in the Covid inquiry but certain things are beyond question. The Irish health service is operating at near 100% capacity. Most countries in Europe operate at about 80% to 85%. If we are hit with further public health emergencies or major accidents, unless we have a buffer within our health system, which means additional capacity so we are not tipping over the edge of the ability of our system to cope on a day-to-day basis, we will be in very serious trouble. All the hardships we saw during Covid could be seen again. What is the Government going to do to ensure that we get ICU capacity at the same levels as the rest of the European Union when it is well below? Is it not time to recognise that having a fragmented, half privatised system is not the way to maximise the capacity that we have in our health service? We need an integrated national, publicly owned and run health service rather than the partially privatised and fragmented system that we have. Considering that staff are the key to increasing capacity, is it not very counter-productive that the Government is holding out on giving public service workers, including nurses and other health workers, a decent pay increase to entice them to stay and work in this country and in our health service? Many of them are leaving because their pay, their income, as the Taoiseach referred to earlier, is insufficient to give them a decent standard of life

or for them to be able to afford accommodation in this country.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Tóibín's questions, look, I was there in government both as Taoiseach and Tánaiste for that very dark period which was the pandemic. These were very difficult decisions to make. Everyone can be an expert in hindsight. We can only make decisions based on the information available and the advice that was put to us by experts. I have no doubt that the lockdowns saved lives. I am absolutely certain that the vaccine programme saved a lot of lives. We see that from the most recent OECD report, which shows that Ireland is one of only a handful of countries in which there were no excess deaths during that period, with only New Zealand, Iceland and Norway outperforming us. Of course the lockdowns had negative effects. I was among many people in government who were very clear about my concerns about the negative effects of lockdowns, not just on people's jobs and businesses but also delayed and deferred diagnoses, which the Deputy raised, which did happen. In housing construction we lost thousands of houses because of the housing construction lockdown.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The only country in Europe.

The Taoiseach: Even for something like Garda numbers, if we had not closed Templemore there would be 1,000 more gardaí today. These things have real consequences but they were difficult decisions. It was never a case of choosing between the right option and the wrong option. It was choosing between options A, B and C, all of which had pros and cons.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We were an outlier.

The Taoiseach: Often those decisions were finely balanced. The public health advice more often than not was for deeper, longer, stricter lockdowns. That was often the view of the Opposition, too, indeed some even flirted with the bizarre zero Covid policy which has proven to be among the worst options when we see the effects that occurred, or certainly not a sustainable option as it was abandoned by all the countries that attempted it.

In respect of Deputy Ó Murchú's questions about the terms of reference of the Covid inquiry, I am going to consult with Opposition leaders this week. I had hoped to do so in December but my diary just was not able to do it because of the amount of other obligations I have, particularly in relation to foreign travel. I hope that can go ahead this week. We will share the draft terms of reference with Opposition parties and discuss their views on the composition of them. Unfortunately I am not going to be in a position to engage personally with all of the different individual groups and stakeholders. We would never get this commission up and running. If it was possible to schedule that many meetings I would but I just cannot. We will find a mechanism to consult interested groups and stakeholders.

On health service capacity, I agree that our health service needs more capacity, not least because of our rising population, our aging population and the development of new treatments. What Deputy Boyd Barrett did not acknowledge is that this is exactly what this Government has been doing since 2020, in the three or four years since we have been in office. We have 20,000 more staff in our health service now than we had in 2020. Yes, there are people leaving but there are way more people joining, 20,000 more in fact. We have 1,000 more consultants than we had in 2020. We have 1,000 more hospital beds than we had in 2020. We have more ICU beds and the Deputy is right that we are going to need a lot more. In terms of nurses we are now in the top five in the western world when it comes to practising nurses per head, even higher when it is practising nurses per bed. For the first time that I can remember, in the most

recent statistics we are now around average in terms of the number of doctors that we have. We had been below average previously. There have been pay increases and we are in negotiations with public service unions about further pay increases. We would have liked to have that agreed back in October or November but it has not been possible. I do think that the utopian system, or perhaps the ideal system, to be fair, that Deputy Boyd Barrett describes sounds very like the NHS. It might have been a model that would have worked 50 or 100 years ago but it does not work in the modern world. What do we see in the NHS? We see longer waiting lists and waiting times for patients, lower life expectancy, worse outcomes when it comes to stroke and heart attack and lower pay for the staff.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is because they ripped it apart.

The Taoiseach: That is definitely not a model that we will be following. In the election we will be encouraging people not to vote for Sinn Féin or for left wing parties precisely because that is what they want to do in Ireland. It is not a good thing.

On long Covid, early in the pandemic the HSE identified a need for a national service for long Covid and to set up a multidisciplinary team to develop a model of care under the auspices of the chief clinical officer. The model of care is now being implemented building on existing service provision in addition to establishing new services across GP and community services and acute hospitals, to ensure a national service is in place for those who need it. Funding for the model of care has been increased to €6.6 million this year. At present there are six long Covid clinics and seven post-acute Covid clinics that are operating nationally. The clinics currently operate at St. Vincent's and Beaumont and the post-acute Covid clinics operating under the new model of care will be in the Mater and Connolly Hospital in Blanchardstown. In addition, Tallaght, St. James's Hospital, CUH, UHG and Limerick hospitals are operating combined post-acute and long Covid clinics. The HSE is working with Letterkenny to have a more definitive timeline around their anticipated launch date. Recruitment, which includes consultants in the areas of infectious disease, respiratory medicine, psychiatry, neurology and allied health professionals, clinical psychologists and administrators, is under way. To date 66 WTE primary notification numbers have been issued across all of the post-acute and long Covid clinics. As of 8 September last year, 46 whole-time equivalent posts had been followed. Deputies will appreciate that long Covid is an emerging area of medicine and expertise. There is still so much that we do not know about it.

Deputy Mick Barry: And the human rights expert?

The Taoiseach: I will be consulting with the Opposition parties on Thursday and am happy to go through it all then.

Deputy Mick Barry: I would have thought you might have a view on it, but anyway.

Church-State Relations

11. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when he last met with church leaders in Ireland. [55133/23]

The Taoiseach: Like public representatives generally, I meet church leaders informally from time to time in the course of attending official or public events. The most recent formal

meeting between the Office of the Taoiseach and the church leaders took place on 15 April 2021, when the now Tánaiste met the leaders of all the Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church and the Irish Council of Churches. I had the opportunity to meet the papal nuncio shortly before Christmas. I understand that discussions at these forums covered the contribution to peace-building and the work churches undertake on an ongoing basis at community level in Northern Ireland in particular.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Religious leaders of all faiths are working overtime in this country at the moment. They do enormous work in helping the vulnerable, members of the Travelling community, victims of human trafficking, those in prison, those who are homeless, those with addictions, those who are grieving and so on, and in terms of integration and working with many in our migrant communities. They must, however, be better supported by the Government. I always find it very interesting to watch many within the political establishment, who are so hostile to those of the Catholic faith in particular, rely heavily on those religious people to pick up the tab in areas of Government neglect.

I take the opportunity to pay tribute to a nun, a Columban sister whom I know in Navan. At the age of 94, Sr. Catherine Lillis received the Oireachtas Human Dignity Award from the Ceann Comhairle. She has worked in missionaries in Myanmar, Hong Kong and Egypt. Her hope, in her old age, is to extend the addiction treatment centre she founded in Navan so it can treat women as well as men. She is a mighty woman who has done wonders for the town of Navan. There is an awful lot that politicians in this House could learn from her. What steps is the Government taking to help and support religious leaders of all faiths in the great work they are doing throughout the country?

Deputy Bríd Smith: In his engagement with religious leaders, did the Taoiseach or officials from his Department have any discussion with Archbishop Eamon Martin? It may have gone under the radar but just before Christmas, after the Dáil had wound down, the archbishop made a statement on the safe access zones Bill. Can the Taoiseach hurry this legislation up? There have been protests outside abortion clinics this morning in Limerick, and they are pretty intimidating protests by men carrying rosary beads and aggressively approaching women attending for reproductive healthcare. In this statement, the archbishop said “The imposition of so-called ‘safe’ abortion zones will further silence the voice of the innocent unborn”, and the introduction of such zones “increases fears that freedom of religion, belief, expression and association are being undermined and open to attack”. That is a pretty serious and aggressive statement to make when we need this Bill to be fast-tracked through as quickly as possible. Will the Taoiseach also comment on what the Government intends doing in relation to the Marie O’Shea review, which again went under the radar just as we broke up for Christmas, and how it is going to legislate to implement the recommendations she made?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Saint John of God Community Services is facing a funding crisis. The organisation has informed me that a meeting of the board is taking place this Thursday. If the €32 million deficit, which the HSE and the Government were supposed to address, and additional funding is not made available, it will not be able to provide services. We need to understand there are 8,000 children in its services. In my area, the organisation provides respite services, special schools, disability services, CAMHS and so on. There was a memorandum of understanding to deal with the funding problems. The money was supposed to have been allocated in the budget, was not allocated, and now we are facing an impending crisis whereby those services could cease in a very short while. Obviously, that cannot happen. I do not know

if the Taoiseach knows anything about this, but it needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency because we are talking about a lot of children, a lot of families, a lot of vulnerable people and absolutely critical services that are currently underfunded.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Did the issue of trans rights in education and healthcare come up in discussions with church leaders? The Catholic Primary School Management Association recently wrote to the Government, arguing that students should not be taught what it means to be transgender. It stated that it would be “counterproductive, generating unnecessary divisions” and, “more seriously, it might add to a growing psychological contagion amongst young and vulnerable children”. It is bizarre language that seems to suggest that being trans is some sort of contagious disease. Did any of that come up in discussion with church leaders?

It relates to the question of trans healthcare, where Ireland is at the very bottom of the pile. A 2022 report by Transgender Europe rated Ireland’s trans healthcare as worst in European Union. A big part of that is the failure to discuss with trans people and to bring their experience into the centre of the kind of informed consent model we need to develop. An example of that is the fact the new clinical lead for transgender services in Ireland, appointed by the HSE, appears to have been appointed without any consultation with any trans rights groups or the trans community about the role and the person who is going to fill the role - none of it. Does the Taoiseach agree that this is not the way to go about building an appropriate model for trans healthcare in this country?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I also raise the issue of Saint John of God Community Services. It has been brought to my attention that 8,000 adults and children receive supports in everything from mental health services to, in particular, disability services from the organisation. We are talking about community services and residential care. My area is served by Saint John of God North East Services, which provides a significant amount of its services in County Louth. It provides services to around 400 people and, in some cases, such as in the likes of Drumcar, we are talking about citizens who have the highest of needs.

We have been in this situation previously. I think it was back in September 2020 that the threat was made by the organisation, without choice, to transfer services back to the HSE. I understand that a decision was made in April 2021 to carry out a sustainability and impact assessment. The results were published in October 2023, but we have not seen any action on it. The organisation claims it has insufficient funding to be able to deliver these very necessary services. It is talking about starting the process of handing responsibility back to the HSE on Thursday. That cannot possibly happen. I have asked Mr. Bernard O'Regan, head of disability services in the HSE, about it. I understand engagement is ongoing, but we really need to bring it to a conclusion. It is not fair on the citizens who need these services nor on their families. We cannot be caught in this round-the-garden type scenario, where organisations constantly need to threaten to get the necessary services for some of our neediest citizens.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for their questions. On Deputy Tóibín’s question, I put on the record that the Government is very grateful for and recognises the work done by the religious in Ireland and all over the world. Given the scandals that have affected churches and religious bodies and given the existence of religious extremism in the world, sometimes that can be forgotten, but it should not be forgotten. We will all know of people - nuns, priests and other religious people - who have made an enormous contribution to society and have given their lives, essentially, to help others. We have seen that in healthcare, education, housing, addiction services and poverty alleviation, for example. It is easily forgotten that when the State was

founded 100 years ago, we did not have a Department of social welfare and we did not have a Department of Health. Most people at the time did not consider these things to be matters for the State. It was often left to voluntary and religious bodies to fill that gap. Of course, things have changed so much since then.

We intend to get the safe access zones Bill enacted this year. I have not had any engagement with religious leaders on it specifically, although the last meeting I participated in was in 2021 and that was quite some time ago at this stage. It certainly was not raised with me by the papal nuncio or by the Archbishop of Dublin.

I am going to have to seek an update from the Minister on Saint John of God. I am aware of some of the issues facing the organisation, but I am not fully up to date.

4 o'clock

I am sure these things will be resolved by negotiation - they always are - but I will seek an update from the Minister on it today, given the Deputies have raised it.

In respect of education about trans people, trans people exist. They have always existed. Now they can be more open about it, which is a good thing, but we have a long way to go. It is my view that it is right that children should learn about people who are transgender and what that means. I would prefer it if children learned about these things from their teachers in their schools rather than in the schoolyard, and from their loving parents rather than the Internet. If we do not have education in schools, I think we are letting children down in that regard.

Trans healthcare is a new and evolving area of medicine. It is controversial and there is a lot of disagreement within the profession about what the right treatments, diagnoses and investigations should be. There is so much we do not know about it; we are still learning. It is very important that NGOs should be consulted but, as with any area of healthcare, it has to be based on science and not on politics. It has to be led by science. I say that as somebody who is an LGBT advocate and a member of the LGBT community. Really, healthcare has to be led by science, not by politics.

Conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Motion

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

expresses its deepest concern at the continued deterioration of the situation in Gaza and the resulting catastrophic humanitarian disaster with over 24,000 dead, thousands missing, 1.9 million people displaced, and massive destruction of housing and vital infrastructure, including education facilities;

deeply deplores the major food insecurity on a massive scale, with United Nations (UN) agencies warning of imminent famine which will affect 400,000 people, the near collapse of the health system in large parts of Gaza with 65 per cent of hospitals now

shut and the World Health Organisation (WHO) warning of widespread death from preventable diseases;

condemns the ongoing bombardment of Gaza;

highlights the urgent need for full, safe, and unhindered access for the delivery of humanitarian aid by UN agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs);

demands the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza, and the cessation of indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza into Israel;

underlines its deep concern at the continued deterioration of the situation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, particularly the violence against and displacement of Palestinian communities by some Israeli settlers;

condemns the recent Israeli announcements of further funding for illegal settlements, which are a breach of international law and undermines the two-state solution;

notes:

— the International Court of Justice (ICJ) proceedings instituted by South Africa under the Genocide Convention, and the hearings last week involving the parties to this case;

— the concerns expressed by a range of States and organisations regarding breaches of international law, including international humanitarian law in this fraught and catastrophic conflict;

— the two other cases and investigations ongoing in respect of Israel and Palestine, including the ICJ advisory opinion on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem; and the ongoing investigation by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) of the situation in Palestine, focused on potential war crimes and crimes against humanity since 2014, and including the events of 7th October and all actions since that date;

— that Ireland intervened before the ICJ in the case taken by Ukraine against Russia, in addition to participating in the two advisory opinion cases related to Israeli actions in Palestine, in 2004 and 2023; and

— that third-party State interventions in such cases only take place after the Court has made its order on preliminary measures and the associated filing of a memorial by the applicant and should be based on necessary legal and policy analysis;

welcomes:

— the Government's additional voluntary contribution of €3 million to the ICC, to adequately resource all situations before the Court, including Palestine; and

— the participation by Ireland at the level of the Attorney General in oral proceedings in the ICJ advisory opinion case in February in The Hague;

agrees that the overwhelming priority of the Government must be to advocate for an immediate stop to the death and destruction in Gaza and take relevant actions to this end; and

agrees to:

— insist on full, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access to Gaza and support the UN in their efforts to increase the flow of humanitarian goods into Gaza;

— support any decision of the ICJ on preliminary measures, which are final and binding on the parties concerned, and urge all parties to the Genocide Convention to also do so;

— strongly consider an intervention in the South Africa v Israel case at the ICJ, as a matter of urgency after the Court has made its order on preliminary measures and the filing by South Africa of its memorial in the case, which is the only appropriate process to do so and following the necessary legal and policy analysis;

— continue to underline the independence and impartiality of the ICC and to support its work; insist that all States, whether they are parties to the Rome Statute or not, cooperate with the ICC investigation into the situation in Palestine and Israel; and

— drive efforts at European Union level to institute a sanctions regime against violent settlers in the West Bank who are attacking and displacing Palestinian communities, differentiating between Israel itself and the illegal settlements that are illegal under international law.

The motion gives a comprehensive presentation of the Government's position on the shocking and horrifying war in Gaza, which is now more than 100 days old. As Members of this House will know, I have long and repeatedly called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. In December, an overwhelming majority of the international community, including a majority of European Union states, conveyed this same urgent message, which represented a significant shift of opinion from the beginning of the war. The United Nations Security Council has demanded that the parties to the conflict allow the immediate, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance at scale directly to the Palestinian civilian population throughout the Gaza Strip, yet that is not happening at the volumes and urgency necessary.

The situation on the ground continues to deteriorate. More than 25,000 deaths have now been reported in the Gaza Strip. More than 100 Israeli hostages continue to be held by Hamas. The humanitarian situation is catastrophic. The degree of humanitarian assistance entering the strip remains completely inadequate. The entire population in Gaza is considered to be acutely food insecure, while one quarter of its population face catastrophic hunger and starvation.

Furthermore, at a time when the focus should be on de-escalation, we are witnessing heightened tensions in the region as a whole. The situation on the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon, where Irish troops are serving in the UNIFIL mission, remains extremely tense. Attacks on shipping in the Red Sea by the Houthis in Yemen are not only putting the lives of the crews in danger but are having an increasingly serious impact on global trade, lives and livelihoods, because when an economy and trade are disrupted, the poorest and furthest behind suffer the most, especially in Africa and the Middle East.

23 January 2024

A widening or escalation of this conflict would have devastating consequences for the region and the world. We repeatedly hear from leaders in the region that escalation is in nobody's interests. We must not allow it to happen, and there needs to be a collective international focus to prevent an escalation of this war. I am particularly concerned about the situation in Lebanon, not least in the context of different voices that are emanating from Israel in that respect.

Yesterday, I attended a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels. This provided an opportunity to engage directly with our counterparts in the region, including the Israeli and Palestinian foreign ministers and the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, as well as the secretary general of the League of Arab States. Throughout all my interactions, I reiterated the need for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. In particular, this was an opportunity to address this message directly to the new Israeli foreign minister. I recalled Ireland's unequivocal condemnation of Hamas attacks. I made it clear, however, that while Israel has a right to address the threat from Hamas and defend itself, it must exercise this right in line with international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law. This means the response must comply with the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. The large-scale civilian casualties and the enormous destruction mean we cannot avoid the conclusion that these principles are being breached in Gaza and that some of Israel's actions amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

It goes without saying the actions of Hamas in brutally attacking civilians on 7 October, taking hundreds of hostages, continuing to fire rockets indiscriminately at Israel and using civilian infrastructure for military purposes are also clear breaches of international humanitarian law.

In my discussion with minister Katz in Brussels yesterday, I underlined Ireland's full support for the United Nations agencies, in particular those staff working on the ground in Gaza, who are carrying out their role at immense personal risk. I was clear that the sustained campaign of disinformation and delegitimation that is being carried out by Israel, directed towards the United Nations and international organisations, particularly UNRWA, needs to stop. Israel should foster a constructive relationship with these organisations, which are doing heroic work in Gaza under impossible conditions.

We also received a very clear message at the Foreign Affairs Council meeting yesterday from the Palestinian foreign minister, Riyad al-Maliki, on the situation in the West Bank. As the House is aware, settler violence against, and displacement of, Palestinian communities were already serious concerns before the terrorist attacks of 7 October, and this was a focus of my visit to the region last September. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has reported that from January to October 2023, there had already been the highest levels of violence from Israeli security forces and Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since United Nations records began in 2005. The situation has further deteriorated since 7 October. In the period to 21 January, 358 Palestinians had been killed, including 91 children, in the West Bank, and at least 198 Palestinian households had been displaced. This is absolutely unacceptable. Yesterday at the Foreign Affairs Council we were told in no uncertain terms that the West Bank is at boiling point and is at huge risk of implosion also.

We made clear yesterday Ireland's demand that we move at EU level to impose sanctions on extreme Israeli settlers. Discussions are already ongoing at working level on proposals based on strong evidence that enjoy very broad support. There are only one or two countries that have reservations at this stage. The idea is to get a European Union sanctions regime against violent settlers in the West Bank, which would be a first and follows the US position on that.

Perspectives for long-term peace were also a focus of discussion yesterday, especially with our partners from the region. In view of the recent comments by Prime Minister Netanyahu, a strong message from the international community on the centrality of a Palestinian state to the long-term security of Israelis and Palestinians is more important than ever. This is a view that is held by the overwhelming majority of the international community. It was underlined by President Biden following his recent contact with Prime Minister Netanyahu. This can only be done through a sustained and serious commitment to a two-state solution. It may seem impossible at this juncture, but it is the only way forward. I spoke with Arab partners yesterday about their thinking about a comprehensive political plan for peace. I expect that an Arab peace plan could be finalised in the coming weeks. I emphasised Ireland's full support for their work, centred on a viable Palestinian state and the right to peace and security for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

It is critical that the vast majority of EU states with like-minded views support a two-state solution and that our actions would complement the work of the Arab peace plan. That is why we have undertaken to keep in close contact with Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular. Their plan will be comprehensive and will take on board the security dimensions in the region, as well as the political and humanitarian aspects and will principally involve a Palestinian state. The broader picture is to ensure security for Palestinians and Israelis alike. We have to continue to work towards that peace track. Our actions and potential actions we might take have to be in that context and framework. We have to get as broad an international consensus as possible behind the creation of a Palestinian state. I believe the opportunity is there to harness a very significant critical mass of countries behind this particular initiative, not just within the European Union but globally.

The case taken by South Africa under the genocide convention has been a particular focus of Deputies in this House over recent days. Both Israel and Hamas must be held accountable for any and all violations of international humanitarian law, including potential war crimes and crimes against humanity. We have fully supported the investigation of this by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, which is vital to ensure accountability. That investigation at the ICC is under way. We have committed additional voluntary funding to the ICC of €3 million to assist in its work, including in relation to Palestine. The important point here is that the prosecutor is looking for resources. The case is active and he is prosecuting the case in respect of all actions from 7 October until now, and indeed going back to 2014 in relation to the occupied territories.

It is also worth pointing out that Ireland has participated in two advisory opinion cases related to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, one in 2004 and one that is currently ongoing. Ireland will participate in oral hearings on that case in The Hague next month. We were one of the few countries to submit a very strong, robust and substantial legal opinion and submission to that case. The Attorney General will give an oral presentation to the court in February on that case. I heard some commentary last week from some parties opposite that Ireland is cowardly and does not want to take this on. We are already before a court holding Israel to account. We are one of the few countries that are actually doing that. However, the issue is that we must be credible when we engage internationally and in the courts on these matters. I mean "credible" insofar as we are not doing it for political reasons. We are doing it for substantive reasons. We do it to win the case and to succeed before the courts in terms of the presentation of our case.

Again regarding the proceedings of the South African case, no country has joined that case, because they cannot do so right now. Not even Palestine has joined that case. Those are the facts. Despite the misinformation from last week, no country has joined the case. What has

happened is that South Africa has sought preliminary findings from the International Court of Justice in respect of the genocide convention. The preliminary requests are ones we fully support and have supported: for example, the ending of the war, an immediate ceasefire and unimpeded, urgent access to humanitarian aid. We will await the outcome of those preliminary findings. That is the sensible thing to do because we take these proceedings very seriously. It is important that we do that. The preliminary hearings took place on 11 and 12 January. We believe the court will make its decision by the end of January or early February because the judge said they would accelerate their decision-making and do that perhaps more quickly than in earlier cases.

In our motion, we are saying we will strongly consider an intervention in the South Africa v. Israel case at the International Criminal Court. We will analyse the findings. We will also then have to get a substantive case because South Africa has not submitted a substantive case. It will then have to submit a memorial, which will be the substantive presentation to the court on the substantive issue of genocide. We would need to see that, or we can just do our own. I would like to see that. I presume South Africa will share that with us when it has completed it. Then, we will make a decision not just on whether to join, but on what basis we would join and what arguments we would make in the context of the convention itself. This is important. One has to have a strong legal basis to do this.

As I said before, interventions by states are not about joining on side or the other. They aim to assert a legal interpretation of the issue at hand. We would want to legally be able to say that the convention has been breached and give a substantive presentation on why we believe it has been breached. It is a legal process in front of a court that has a unique role in interpreting and upholding international law. The independence and objectivity of the court must be respected and I think that would be accepted across the House. The court is not a political forum. It is not a debating chamber. Any decision we take on intervention will be based on detailed and rigorous legal analysis.

It was thrown around that we just joined the Ukraine v. Russia case, but it took some time to join the Ukraine v. Russia case. Russia actually accused Ukraine of genocide initially. Russia used that claim of genocide against Ukraine as a basis for its invasion. Ukraine refuted that claim of genocide by Russia. We declared our intervention in that case six months after the provisional order and after ongoing consultations with Ukraine. That is the truth of that situation. I am not saying it will take that long in this case, but that is what happened factually with the Ukraine case.

Internationally and globally, nobody questions Ireland's bona fides in respect of this issue or the leadership we have shown from the very beginning of this to assert the Palestinian right to its own state and to call for an immediate ceasefire and, above all, unimpeded access to goods. Yesterday, while people were talking about peace plans, etc., just before the Arab leaders left they asked us to get more trucks. They said we need more trucks to get in tomorrow and we need more aid to get in. That is the immediate priority they are calling for.

I am very conscious of the significant public interest and concern on Gaza. I know that the very visible expressions of solidarity that have taken place across the country over recent weeks and months are heard and valued by the Palestinian people. However, I regret that the rhetoric of a small number of individuals has been unacceptable. Calling for the "total dismantlement" of Israel, as some in this House have done, is not acceptable. I read the statement by People Before Profit-Solidarity last week, which essentially or by implication condoned the Hamas

attack of 7 October-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No, it did not.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----in talking about the background-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No, it did not.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----to what happened on 7 October.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It did not.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have not heard you condemn it ever, Deputy Boyd Barrett, and that is telling in itself. You have never condemned the Hamas attack on 7 October, which involved brutal murder, rape and violent violations of human rights.

Denying the right of the Jewish people to self-determination is not acceptable either. Blaming individual Israeli or Jewish people for the actions of the Israeli Government is not acceptable. Such views and the amplification of such views is a distortion of everything Ireland stands for. They damage our reputation as a country that is committed to peace, reconciliation, tolerance and mutual understanding. They also damage our standing as a country which believes passionately that people with different views, histories, traditions and identities can live side by side, find constructive ways to coexist and use political rather than violent means to advance their goals, and that competing narratives and strongly held beliefs and identities do not have to result in a zero-sum game which ends in the destruction of the other. Our belief is strongly based on the two-state solution. I do not see any other solution. Deputy Boyd Barrett may differ in his view on this matter, and I respect his right to do so, but I passionately believe that it is the only potential solution.

We will continue to be a leading voice within the European Union, the United Nations and globally. We are consistent in our message in Europe, the United States and elsewhere, and with everybody we deal with, as to how we think these matters should proceed.

As I said, it remains manifestly clear that addressing the urgent humanitarian situation on the ground, securing the unconditional release of hostages and ending the immediate conflict must be our overriding priority. We are not there yet, but the dial is moving within the European Union and at the United Nations. We are seeing growing international pressure regarding the need for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. European Union sanctions against Israeli settlers are under active discussion now, as are intensified efforts between the European Union and regional partners towards finding a sustainable peace.

We absolutely need to move faster, more urgently - I mean collectively and internationally - and with greater ambition. Ireland will continue to be at the forefront of advocating for that. The people of Gaza cannot wait.

The progress that we all want to see will not be achieved by shouting louder and longer or by means of rhetorical flourishes. It will be achieved through intensified work on concrete diplomatic and political initiatives. This is my focus. It will remain the focus of this Government. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move amendment No. 4:

(a) To insert the following after “condemns the ongoing bombardment of Gaza”:

“by Israel and reiterates the call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire”;

(b) To insert the following after “and the hearings last week involving the parties to this case”:

“; and commends South Africa for its action in this regard: determining that it is valid to ask the ICJ to investigate whether there is a risk of genocide; and notes that other states have indicated their intention to participate in the case;”;

(c) To delete “that third-party State interventions in such cases only take place after the Court has made its order on preliminary measures and the associated filing of a memorial by the applicant and should be based on necessary legal and policy analysis;”;

(d) To insert the following after “based on necessary legal and policy analysis;”:

“that Article I of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (‘Genocide Convention’) obliges parties to that Convention, including Ireland, to prevent genocide, which is defined in Article II as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

— that the International Court of Justice has held that “a State’s obligation to prevent [genocide], and the corresponding duty to act, arise at the instant that the State learns of, or should normally have learned of, the existence of a serious risk that genocide will be committed”.

— notes that Ireland’s written submissions in the *Ukraine v Russia* case state: “In Ireland’s view, the notion of ‘undertake to prevent’ implies that each State party must assess whether a genocide or a serious risk of genocide exists prior to taking action pursuant to Article I [of the Genocide Convention].”

(e) To delete “strongly consider an intervention in the *South Africa v Israel* case” to substitute with “make an intervention in the *South Africa v Israel* case”;

(f) To insert the following after “settlements that are illegal under international law”:

“urgently conduct an assessment for the purpose of Article I of the Genocide Convention of whether there is a serious risk that genocide is being committed in the context of the war in Gaza, taking into account the views of relevant experts, and to present the conclusion of this assessment to Dáil Éireann at the earliest possible opportunity;”;

(g) To insert the following after “settlements that are illegal under international law”:

“further calls on the Government to utilise all diplomatic, economic and legislative mechanisms available to apply sanctions against Israel until such time as offensive military actions against the Palestinian people end and Israel has given a clear commitment to adherence to international law.”.

For the purposes of clarity, the Tánaiste referred to blaming Jewish people for the actions of the Israeli Government as not being acceptable. He lamented the amplification of that view. The Tánaiste it is one of the very few people I have heard amplifying that view. In fact, I have not heard it amplified at all in the Dáil in the course of the horrors of the past 100 days. Just to be clear, many Jewish people internationally stand firmly on the side of human rights and freedom against the savagery in Gaza and have been out on the streets in unprecedented numbers stating that very clearly.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: For more than 100 days, the people of Gaza have endured a humanitarian horror of unimaginable scale, a genocide broadcast to the world in real time and inflicted upon an impoverished refugee population by the apartheid Israeli regime that is hell-bent on erasing the Palestinian nation from the face of the earth. This is not conjecture. The Israeli Government has not attempted to hide its objective. It has repeatedly, brazenly and to devastating effect told the world of and demonstrated its aim to slaughter the Palestinian people, crush any chance of a free Palestinian state and dismantle any hope of a two-state solution as mandated by UN resolution.

As recently as the weekend, Mr. Netanyahu stated his vision very plainly. He stated, “I will not compromise on full Israeli security control over the entire area in the west of Jordan – and this is contrary to a Palestinian state”. It is right that his comments have been resoundingly condemned, for these are not the words of a person even contemplating the notion of peace. They are the words of a man following a dehumanising, supremacist and, frankly, deranged vision. Before the eyes of the world, Netanyahu is determined to continue a genocidal campaign in Gaza. It is a relentless barbaric assault that has seen more than 25,000 Palestinians slaughtered, including, as the Tánaiste said, thousands of women and children. The Israeli military is killing 250 Palestinians every day. Entire families and communities have been wiped out. Some 1.9 million people have been displaced. Gaza’s civilian infrastructure has been obliterated, with schools and hospitals decimated by a ferocious military bombardment. The people of Gaza face starvation and the catastrophic spread of disease. These actions are not defensive; these actions are war crimes.

The intensity of Israel’s bombardment continues mercilessly with the ongoing assault on the city of Khan Younis, where it again has attacked and laid to hospitals at which injured, sick and dying people are being treated. The people of Gaza are threatened with annihilation. That is the situation. It is to the very great shame of the international community that this atrocity is happening in full sight. Israel has been given free rein to commit war crimes against the Palestinian people with impunity. As the demand from ordinary people for a full and immediate ceasefire reverberates all across the globe, the Israeli regime thumbs its nose and continues its mass slaughter in Gaza. Why is that? It is because the weak response of world leaders has told

Mr. Netanyahu and the Israeli Government and its military machine that they are untouchable and can shred international law without fear or consequence.

The Tánaiste billed what is before the House as a motion demanding a ceasefire. The word “ceasefire” does not appear in the motion. Where is it? The motion refers to “an immediate stop to the death and destruction in Gaza”. Why the semantics? Why can the Tánaiste not just say the word “ceasefire”?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have said it 100 times.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: An immediate and full ceasefire is what is needed. That is the call the Government should make, and that call should be contained in the motion.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have made it. Do not be ridiculous now.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Israel must stop its massacre in Gaza. There can be absolutely no equivocation on this matter. What is described in the motion is mass slaughter, the deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure, the displacement of millions of people, starvation and the destruction of hospitals and schools. It describes the very markers of genocidal actions – a blatant attempt to wipe out Palestinians, seize Gaza and enforce a second Nakba.

The question relating to the need for sanctions against the State of Israel has been answered without a shadow of a doubt. Israel must be sanctioned. Yet, in this motion, the Government proposes to impose sanctions against illegal settlers alone. It seeks to differentiate Israel from illegal settlements. Have we slipped into some alternate universe? These illegal, violent settlers who attack and displace Palestinians are armed, supported and enabled by Israel. It is state policy. They are part of Israel’s colonial strategy to annex Palestinian lands. The accountable party is the State of Israel, which continues to act with impunity. Despite all of the Tánaiste’s rhetoric to the contrary, the motion demonstrates no seriousness about sanctioning illegal actions and breaches of international law.

Netanyahu is telling the world explicitly what his aims are. The Government needs to listen to him and to what he is saying, and then there needs to be an appropriate, proportionate and definitive response. We are all conversant with the process of the International Court of Justice.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, you are not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We know the steps that must be followed to initiate a case in the Hague to establish jurisdiction and the grounds for dispute. The Tánaiste has seen the endless footage of Israel’s atrocities in Gaza. He has heard reams of heart-wrenching testimony from doctors and international aid workers on the ground. In the midst of undeniable genocidal actions, these steps should be urgently engaged by the Government. If the case for making a referral to the ICJ against Russia was strong, then the case for making one in respect of Israeli aggression is absolutely beyond dispute.

South Africa has shown what it means to lead. It has demonstrated what it means to stand for humanity against genocide and it is disgraceful the Government would still equivocate and still hedge its bets. The Tánaiste fails in his motion to make absolutely clear that Ireland will support South Africa’s case in the Hague and I think that a very great shame. Let us be clear there is nothing stopping the Tánaiste bringing that type of clarity to the Dáil today and if he did or if he does, he will have the full support of this House. The truth is the Tánaiste says he

will consider joining South Africa's case after the preliminary stages. He says that as if the people of Gaza have all the time in the world, as if the abyss of genocide is not a reality every day for the men, women and children of Gaza as we speak. Gaza has become a graveyard for children, for families, for people clinging to life and clinging to their very existence. If this is not enough for the Government to stand up and take a case against Israel and join South Africa in the International Court of Justice, then what will it take? When will it be? The people of Gaza are running out of time and Ireland needs to act and be clear now.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Very dishonest.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Tánaiste, that remark was entirely unbecoming of you, if I may say so. Your approach on this issue has sometimes been found wanting. Every single time Sinn Féin has tried to secure an initiative from the Government we have liaised with the Government. On the contrary, the Tánaiste's approach is to announce at 12 noon through the media that he is going to bring forward a motion and then give it to Opposition Members at the very last minute with about a 20-minute window to make amendments. That is not a government seeking to work in partnership with the rest of the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is a fact.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Tánaiste has had enough time, he has had 20 minutes, and I am going to outline what is a very unfair characterisation by him of genuine attempts of Members of this House to ensure Ireland takes a stand and that Ireland shows leadership-----

Deputy Emer Higgins: Ireland did so.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----in defence of international law, in defence of international humanitarian law and in defence of the UN Charter.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We do.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The question people are asking now, quite rightly, is "How many more?". How many more debates do we need to have, how many more statements do we need to have, how many more motions do we need to bring before this House?

More importantly, how many more Palestinians need to be murdered because currently we are at over 25,000? That is essentially 1% of the entire population of Gaza. How many more women and children, because they make up 70% of that number? In fact, children make up over 10,000 of those Israel has murdered. How many more healthcare professionals have to be killed doing their job in Gaza? The figure currently stands at almost 340. How many journalists telling the world what is happening have to be murdered by Israel? The number currently stands at about 120. How many more people have to be displaced, because currently we are talking about over 2 million people, which is virtually the entire population of Gaza. How many more hospitals have to be attacked because now it stands at every single hospital in Gaza? Just 15 out of the 36 hospitals that were in Gaza are even partially functioning. How many more buildings in Gaza need to be destroyed? It is about 50% at this stage. How many Palestinian people in

Gaza are going to be forced to starve to death or die of entirely preventable diseases before we match what are welcome strong words with strong actions?

We have had strong words. I have commended the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and other Government Ministers when those strong words have been uttered, but they should not pretend those strong words have just come naturally because it took quite a number of days into this conflict before the word “ceasefire” was agreed by the Tánaiste in a motion before this House. It took even longer before words “we condemn Israel for its actions” were agreed by the Government. On the ICJ, the Tánaiste has used the word “misleading” on quite a number of occasions to describe the approach of the Opposition. I remind him that when the Taoiseach was asked directly whether Ireland would support the ICJ case being brought by South Africa his answer was “No” and that he did not intend to do so. I therefore welcome the fact the Government has moved on all those issues but it should not pretend it has not and it should not pretend it is not as a result of the Members of this House trying to pro-actively bring the Government to a point where we take action-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----because we have not got to that point yet, Tánaiste-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: We cannot join the case.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----and I do not believe that is sufficient. In fact, with every single proposition that is brought before him there are reasons not to do it. With the ICC case, we are not going to do it-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The ICC case is happening.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----but we will throw a little bit of money at it. That is despite the fact the Tánaiste knows-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The ICC case is happening. Let us not be dishonest about it. Come on.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----the ICC prosecutor is dragging their heels in respect of this issue-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: You are playing politics.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----and what they need in order to be brought to heel-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is misleading.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----and to advance that is they need states to join the ICC referral.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, they do not.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Yes, they do.

Deputy Micheál Martin: They do not.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Yes, they do.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tánaiste-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: Ask the prosecutor.

Deputy Matt Carthy: When we talked about adopting-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Can people speak in their own time?

Deputy Matt Carthy: When we talked about adopting measures this House has already approved of, namely, the occupied territories Bill, there is an excuse not to do it. The Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill is sitting on the floor of this House. The Government delayed it and it could release that in the morning, straight away. Let us take a substantive measure. Recognising the state of Palestine is something this House and the Upper House have called for and the Tánaiste's programme for Government includes it. There are excuses, such as that others are not ready to join so we will wait. In respect of all the measures that have been brought forward, whether diplomatic, economic, financial, trade or anything that would send a message to Israel that it will pay a price for what it is doing there is an excuse not to do it.

There is another way of doing things. The Government's argument is that if we take any of these measures there is a risk Ireland becoming "isolated". That is the term that the Tánaiste has used.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The case is before the ICJ.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I challenge anybody to suggest to me that South Africa is isolated in the world right now-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----because far from it, it is seen as a world leader in defence of international law. Our request to the Government and our amendment to this motion, which I hope it will support, sets out that Ireland is sending a message to the world that we want to become world leaders too because we will not stand over what Israel is doing in Palestine with the approval and the authorisation, essentially, of the international community because the international community is yet to say "Stop". We want you, Tánaiste, on our behalf to say loudly and clearly that the Irish people say stop, stad anois.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Why does Sinn Féin not say it to its friends in the United States?

Deputy Matt Carthy: We will and we have.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, you have not.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): We move to the Labour Party and Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You have been absolutely silent in the United States.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tánaiste-----

23 January 2024

Deputy Micheál Martin: There has been not a tweet from Friends of Sinn Féin in the United States on Palestine. You have not said a word in the United States.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Can we have silence please?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Not a word, because it would upset your friends and it would upset your donors.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I am sorry, Tánaiste, but can people speak in their own time?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The truth hurts.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Go to the United States and say what you believe.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We will and we do.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You will. Why have you not done it already?

Deputy Matt Carthy: And we do.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You do not do it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We do.

Deputy Micheál Martin: You are silent in the United States, silent.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I am sorry. I thank Members. Deputy Bacik has six and a half minutes.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. It is regrettable we are seeing the debate descend into a shouting match-----

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Hear, hear.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----given the seriousness of the issues we are debating and discussing.

We have all been watching, over the past 100 days, with increasing distress and horror the carnage in Gaza and the utter devastation of a civilian population as a result of the brutal Israeli bombardment. Since the attack by Hamas on 7 October, which was itself brutal and resulted in appalling death and the taking of hostages, we have seen a death toll in Gaza that has surpassed 25,000 people. That is approximately 1% of the entire population. Tens of thousands of homes have been bombarded into rubble. An entire population has been kettled into overcrowded and cramped spaces, deprived of humanitarian aid and with famine and disease now ravaging communities of displaced Gazans. We have heard the heartbreaking testimony from journalists and doctors. We have seen so many children orphaned, killed, or hideously injured and the situation is getting worse and worse. It is apocalyptic. It is hard to see it or describe it as anything but genocidal. We are seeing, of course, as the Tánaiste noted in his speech, that the West Bank is increasingly tense and the situation is worsening there too. The Prime Minister of Israel, Mr. Netanyahu, has made his intentions clear. He has ruled out any possibility of a peaceful, two-state solution and has stamped out any hope that might remain for relief and an end to the

carnage. We are left with having to ensure the international community will intervene to ensure we do see that peaceful, two-state solution of which the Tánaiste has spoken and for which the international community should now be pressing. The Tánaiste spoke, hopefully, of an Arab peace but we need to push for that. We need to see a united front across the international community in condemnation of Netanyahu's government and of the Israeli carnage that is being inflicted on the people of Gaza.

That wish for a common purpose, for solidarity from the international community, is replicated in the communications we have all received from people across the country who want to see that unity of purpose advocated by the Irish Government. They want to see our Government calling for a stronger response from the EU, America, Britain and other western countries to bring about a permanent ceasefire and an end to the brutal bombardment and suffering of the people of Gaza. That is why the South African application to the International Court of Justice matters so much. International law exists to preserve the life and dignity of all humans. It recognises the inherent value of every life. Our international human rights system was born out of the horrors of the Second World War and out of a collective will to reject evil and brutality and to ensure we would have a rules-based international order that could stop the sort of carnage we are seeing now. While that carnage continues, international law is being set at naught and South Africa has recognised that in bringing this case under the Genocide Convention. The capacity of the international community to speak with one voice for an end to genocide and for peace may seem a low bar but it is one we must overcome.

Ireland has shown leadership before and we have sought to work constructively with the Government to see that sort of constructive leadership. We saw it in the early stages of progress on the Control of Economic Activities (Occupied Territories) Bill and in 2021 when this House voted unanimously to condemn the de facto annexation of Palestine by Israel, the first parliament in the EU to do so. We nearly achieved that sort of commonality of purpose in October when most of us supported a cross-party motion calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. It is for that reason that we in the Labour Party are disappointed to see the style of politics that has prevailed this week. Last week I circulated to all party leaders in this House, and to Seanad leaders, a motion which we hoped could form the basis of negotiations to develop a cross-party, united approach in support of the current proceedings in the International Court of Justice. That motion was drafted by the Sadaka organisation with support from Christian Aid. I thank those party leaders who did engage and show support for that motion, many of whom wanted to see it brought forward in Government or Opposition time because it really matters for this House to speak with one, united voice. It is unfortunate we could not achieve a consensus on the wording of that motion. It is also unfortunate to see, in some quarters of this House, attempts to take ownership by individual groups and to see the Government motion circulated so late in the day. I thank the Tánaiste for his personal engagement with me and others but it was very late in the day when we finally saw the text of the motion, with a deadline for amendments less than an hour later. That is no way to do business. It is anathema to what we should be doing, which is working together to try to build a consensus in support of the people of Gaza and to try to achieve an end to their suffering.

The motion before us today does not make an unequivocal commitment to intervening and that is regrettable. That is why the Labour Party has tabled an amendment, which I think I can move now. However, I do welcome the clear statement of intent to intervene which is indicated in the text of the Government motion. As others have acknowledged, that does represent a movement by Government, and one which is very welcome. That is the spirit in which it has

been drafted and Sadaka and other groups recognise that, but what is of concern is that, within the Government motion, not only is there the omission of any reference to a ceasefire explicitly, there is also an omission of any intention to conduct an assessment of whether there is a serious risk of genocide or to use the measures available to Government to deter the commission of genocide, as per the duty to prevent genocide set out in the Genocide Convention, an obligation which the Irish Government has stated exists in its intervention in the Ukraine v. Russia case. In the spirit of the submissions the Government has made in other cases, I would ask the Tánaiste to reflect on the amendments submitted today by the Labour Party and by others in the Opposition. What we want to see is a clearer indication that the Government will support the South African case at the appropriate time. I hope we can continue to work, whatever the outcome of the debate today or any further debate this week, on a cross-party basis to achieve that commonality of purpose, to speak with one voice from this House and from the Seanad to ensure support for the civilian population of Gaza and an end to their suffering, and to support the South African case before the International Court of Justice, a case which has the potential to help bring about an end to suffering and to the commission of genocidal acts in Gaza. It is disappointing to see that we are not going to be able to speak with one voice on this motion but I do hope we will be able, over the coming days and weeks and in light of the fact we are going to see a judgment shortly from the court, to continue to work progressively to achieve that common purpose and shared vision for a ceasefire in Gaza.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): We are back to a Government slot but just before I call the Minister, I wish to clarify that it is my understanding that once the first amendment to a motion is moved, the rest will be dealt with afterwards.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): First things first, since the very start of this crisis on 7 October and the response from the Israeli Government and military, the Irish Government has been absolutely clear and adamant and was first up in the European context in calling for a ceasefire and an end to hostilities. The wording of the motion could not be clearer that our absolute and overwhelming priority must be to advocate for an immediate stop to the death and destruction in Gaza and to take relevant actions to that end. We have been consistent on that from the very start. We have not just been consistent in our response to what has happened in Gaza over the past 100 days. I would argue that the Irish Government and Irish State has been consistent for decades in terms of standing up for the rights of the Palestinian people, for a whole variety of historical reasons.

Let us not depict this as something to divide the Opposition and the Government. I do not see it as such because what we are seeing is absolutely horrific. As I said last week, the World Food Programme has provided evidence that hundreds of thousands of people are at risk of immediate starvation. This is unprecedented and requires urgency. The scale of this is incredible, not to mention the bombing of hospitals, universities, families, journalists - the list goes on. We absolutely accept and understand that, which is why we are giving Government time here today. This is an issue for Government, the Opposition and every party in this House, for the Irish people and for countries and people right around the world.

I thank my party Whip, Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh, for his specific proposal that we would table the motion in Government time. That was appropriate.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That was our idea; it was the Opposition's proposal.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I regret that we could not get the wording to Deputy Bacik sooner

but we had to get it through Government. In the absence of agreement by Government, it was very hard to share it. It is very important we do get agreement. Part of the reason the people want the Government to take a strong line on this is that historically, as a State, we have stood up for the UN Declaration of Human Rights, but that is not exclusive. It also applies to Hamas and to what happened on 7 October. We cannot ignore the death, loss of life and the nature of what happened on that day. We also cannot ignore the disproportionate response from Israel and the fact there is a clear case that has to be heard by the International Court of Justice. We will respond to that in the way we do to all such human rights issues, which is through proper legal international processes because following that approach means our voice is listened to and we are heard. The Department of Foreign Affairs has real expertise in this area, in terms of how we speak at international, UN and other forums, and the Government listens to and heeds the Department's advice because it is really good at this. It knows how to get the legal structures right. Legal process is important here. This is not an insignificant issue or an unimportant legal issue. We have shown in the past an absolute willingness to take a legal position.

In regard to Russia's accusation of genocide in Ukraine, we supported Ukraine in its response to that some five months after the initial accusation because that was the right way to legally counterargue it. It is similar with regard to the UN process where cases have been taken to the International Court of Justice. We are one of the few European countries that has stood up and is willing to back the Palestinian case in written format. Next month, on 22 February, our Attorney General will stand up for half an hour to represent the injustice that has been occurring in Palestine for decades, as well as the past 100 days.

The Government responded a number of weeks ago regarding what it could do. The best and most important thing we were asked to do, which we delivered straightaway, was to re-source the courts. The depiction of this is that the Government is not willing to stand up in the courts when it is the exact opposite. We await the provisional outcomes, but my understanding is the South African case in its initial application is looking for, in every instance, what we have said we want to deliver and what we agree. Let us use our voice in the international forums where it can be strongest. Let us pull the European Union, which we have been doing, towards a position that is closer to the position Ireland holds, which is not where Europe started. Let us use that not just in relation to South Africa's case but as regards the issue of the recognition of sanctions due to what is happening in the West Bank, not just in Gaza, against some of the ongoing atrocities that are taking place. That is the approach the Government is taking which is set out in the motion.

To give our public reassurance, we can absolutely see what is happening and we want to try to impact on it. We do that best in the way we have always done, through the United Nations, the right process, the legal mechanisms, and being strong and clear with our voice, which we are and will be. This injustice has to end today. We will stand with the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights for all citizens in the world. As small a nation as we are, when we get that voice right, and apply it to the legal structures and institutions that are in place, it is where we can be most effective to protect those poor people in Gaza suffering the bombardment and starvation they are today.

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion. I was glad to cede the time given for the planned charities Bill, which will instead be taken on Thursday.

The Irish public has watched with increasing horror the events of the past 100 days unfold.

International human rights law is very important, but we do not need to be versed in it to see that what has been visited on the Palestinian people since October has been motivated by the desire to exact revenge and punishment with extreme disregard for civilian life. The inability of the international community and our international mechanisms to stop the wanton slaughter has been deeply disappointing. People are frustrated that the killing is continuing seemingly without consequence or restraint.

I welcome and thank the South African Government for taking the step of asking the International Court of Justice whether Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. I take the opportunity to draw attention to some of the key elements of the definition of genocide in the UN convention:

... genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, [that is an important phrase] a national, ethnical, racial or religious group ... [by] Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; [or] Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; ...

That last element is becoming increasingly urgent and increasingly important.

Let us also look at what some Israeli leaders have said in the past few months. On 13 October, President Herzog helped set the tone for the invasion and the whole approach when he said, “It is an entire nation out there that is responsible”. Let us listen to that again: the President of Israel said that an entire nation is responsible. He blamed every Palestinian man, woman and child for what happened on 7 October. The Israeli Government and the IDF have certainly acted on this message. Daniel Hagari, the Israeli army spokesperson, said that the army was dropping hundreds of tonnes of bombs on Gaza and that the focus was on destruction not accuracy. These are key people who are leading the war. We now have Netanyahu’s recent dismissal of the two-state solution. It is important to remember all that because it is all happening in the context of the ongoing occupation in the West Bank and the longer term project of the Israeli Government to try to stop the viability of the Palestinian state through the ongoing growth of illegal settlements. The Israeli Government recently announced further funding to further expand the illegal settlement project.

More than 24,000 people are dead and 1.9 million displaced with UN agencies warning of imminent famine affecting 400,000 people, the near collapse of the health system in large parts of Gaza with 65% of hospitals now shut, and the WHO warning of widespread deaths from diseases that are preventable. In the midst of all that, the Israeli foreign minister yesterday showed such disdain for international law and European leaders by touting the idea of a new island as a home for Gazans.

Ireland continues to offer hope to Palestinians. The Government and the House have been a strong signal of hope for Palestinians. The House should continue to stand together in defence of international law. A unified message from Ireland will help the Palestinian cause. However, we should not be naive in thinking that this Israeli Government will heed the International Court of Justice. We must continue to redouble our efforts beyond this week and the ICJ preliminary measures to get a ceasefire urgently and to get accountability. There is much conflict in the world today and there is a war in Europe but what is happening in Gaza will go down in history as one of the worst atrocities any state has committed against a people in our lifetime. Some 24,000 people have been killed in the past four months and 400,000 people have been

deliberately driven to the edge of famine.

I am glad Ireland has shown moral leadership on the international stage in calling out what has been happening in Gaza, but we need to continue to exhaust every option available to us to build support for Palestine and to achieve an immediate ceasefire. I declare my support for the case South Africa is taking to the ICJ. I strongly feel that as soon as possible after the court announces its preliminary measures within the next week that Ireland, as a state, should join the case. We will support any decision of the ICJ on preliminary measures, which are final and binding on the parties concerned. We urge all parties to the convention on genocide to do the same.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Some 24,500 people have been killed in Gaza, 70% of whom were women and children. More than 10,000 children have been murdered. Some 8,000 civilians are buried under the rubble, more than 60,000 have been injured, and 1.9 million or 85% of the population have been displaced. Half of the buildings, housing more than 2 million human beings, have been either damaged or destroyed over a period of months. People face starvation that is unprecedented in recent human history.

How appropriate it was that South Africa took the case to the International Court of Justice and that a tremendous Irishwoman, Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, articulated the reason South Africa took that case. She spoke for the Irish people and those across the world who are devastated by these actions and feel powerless. It was incredibly powerful. If you talk to the activists who fought against the apartheid South African regime over the years, they will tell you the apartheid the Palestinian people have endured for all these years is much worse than what they endured. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and B'Tselem, one after the other and with expert analysis, have clearly demonstrated that Israel is an apartheid state.

5 o'clock

What do we have from the Irish Government? It is a muted response. I spoke in the Dáil when the Human Rights Watch report came out, when the Amnesty International report came out, and when the B'Tselem report came out. I repeatedly asked the Government if they agree that Israel is an apartheid state. I have yet to hear a spokesperson for the Irish Government say "Yes we agree and we accept the findings of those human rights organisations". They cannot even do that.

Senator Frances Black is in the Chamber and is observing proceedings here. The Government could not support her Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018. Even though it was passed by both Houses, this Government could not implement it. We are talking here about saying we will not do trade with people who commit international war crimes, engage in ethnic cleansing and conduct illegal settlements. This Government could not even do that. It could not implement legislation that was passed by both Houses. The Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill 2023 proposed to stop the investment by any arm of the Irish State into those illegal settlements and was brought forward by my colleague Deputy John Brady. The Government could not even do that. When the Dáil and the Seanad voted to recognise the state of Palestine the Government could not implement that. At every step of the way the Government has failed the Palestinian people. It gives comfort to the people whom we have heard on our TV screens and who were just quoted by a Minister. Because they have been allowed to get away with apartheid, with oppression, with ethnic cleansing, and with everything that they have done to the Palestinian people, of course they believe they will get away with

this too because we have been completely impotent. When I say “we”, I mean our Government because our people certainly do not share that. For years whenever the international community has talked about the two-state solution there has been confirmation from Netanyahu of his absolute rejection of that. There is no basis to hide behind some sort of international consensus. There is no basis anymore. This is a failed policy from our Government. Let us be absolutely clear about it.

On 18 July 1984 a Dunnes Stores shop worker, Mary Manning, refused to handle South African goods. That created a huge momentum and the Irish people rose up. A few years later the Irish Government got behind their people, brought in sanctions and confronted the apartheid regime. The Irish Government back then responded to the anger of our people and led the way. Why is it that our Governments again and again fail us with weakness? Even now in the face of unparalleled and unrivalled outrage they still fail to stand with our people. Tonight and tomorrow night the Government will refuse to accept amendments that are about basic decency and about standing on the side of righteousness, on the side of what is right, and on the side of the case taken by South Africa. The Government knows that it should associate itself with that case. It knows it should have done that: many countries did and those countries are on the right side of history. Our Government - not our Irish people - again and again are on the wrong side of this. The Government is too weak and is letting down our people again and again.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I do not welcome that a motion for a debate on an issue of this importance was given to the Opposition at 1.50 p.m. today. We had less than one hour to draw up amendments. This is not even close to being acceptable. To be quite frank, in its current format this motion offers absolutely nothing of substance to the debate. The motion the Government has presented, in its current form, skirts around the issue and makes no explicit commitment to intervene on the side of South Africa in its charge that a genocide is being initiated on the population of Gaza by the State of Israel.

Even more so, this motion loses any credibility when it asserts that the Government will “strongly consider an intervention in the South Africa v Israel case at the ICJ, as a matter of urgency after the Court has made its order on preliminary measures”. What exactly does the Government mean when it says it will “strongly consider an intervention”? Can the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, or any other Minister or Minister of State who will speak presently confirm that we ratified the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1978? Is that not the Irish Government’s position now, as ratified in 1978? Part 1 of that convention includes the provision that state parties to the genocide convention have an explicit obligation to take measures to prevent genocide. Is the Government seriously telling us now, even though it does not lend its weight to the South African case, that if a preliminary determination is made that a potential genocide is ongoing, it will seek only to “strongly consider” intervening? That is an act of extreme cowardice. It is our role as a State to prevent genocide. It is not our role to define it nor prosecute it after the fact. That is the role of the court and we cannot muddle those two entities. We as a signatory have an obligation to assess the risk where there exists an obvious threat of genocide occurring. We are obliged to express those fears both to the court and to the state we deem complicit in this most horrendous act.

I put it to the Minister of State, Jack Chambers, that in the Tánaiste’s contribution today he said the Government will undertake a rigorous legal assessment when the court has made its order after the preliminary stages. The Tánaiste has left the Chamber, but will the Minister of State ask the Tánaiste if he does not feel the legal opinions and the words of eminent Irish hu-

man rights lawyers and professors carry enough weight for us to intervene? I refer to people such as our former President Mary Robinson; Professor Siobhán Mullally and Professor Mary Lawlor, who were part of the UN independent expert statement as far back as 16 November 2023; and Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, who did us proud last week in advancing the case of South Africa to the International Court of Justice. Yet in several weeks' time the Government claims that we are going to do a rigorous legal assessment and sometime after that will decide if we will lend our weight. That is anathema to the ratification of the genocide convention we committed ourselves to in 1978 and to the express wishes of the Irish people.

Is it not also something we can simply see with our own eyes? Do we deny that more than 100,000 Palestinians have been killed, reported missing or wounded in Gaza since Israel began its operations three months ago? Do we neglect the current figure of 25,000 people dead, which I imagine will change by tomorrow given that 225 people are dying every single day and half of those are children? Do we neglect the fact that 85% of the population has been displaced? We must also remember that as far back as October 2023, we debated whether Israel could have bombed a hospital. Then they went and bombed every single hospital in Gaza. Now they are annihilating universities. They are targeting journalists. More than 100 journalists have been targeted for assassination and still we say that we will do a rigorous assessment of the facts. This is not in keeping with the express wishes of the Irish people.

In his contribution the Tánaiste mentioned that no country has joined South Africa's case. That is only kind of true. It is a blurring of the line and very purposefully done. Germany, the UK and the United States of America have already expressed their intention to join on the side of Israel and argue against the fact that a genocide is taking place. We know the motivation of those entities. We say that regardless of whether it happens tonight or when we bring forward our motion tomorrow, the Government must start the process, develop a legal strategy and put the factors into place. The Tánaiste also referred to the Russian case and said that it took us six months for us to intervene. The work did not start after six months, however; it started a long time before that. The Department of Foreign Affairs was presenting its case and building the argument. All we are asking of the Irish Government is to intervene at the nearest available opportunity to do so. That is what we are asking.

The Social Democrats have submitted a number of amendments we would like to advance. I also want to refer to a ceasefire. Of course we all wish, hope and pray every single day for a ceasefire. We accept that eventually a ceasefire may happen and bombs will stop falling, but what will be left of Gaza when it does happen? What buildings will be left? Where will the 85% of the displaced Gazan population go? Yesterday, a foreign minister of Israel spoke with other foreign ministers and talked about a displacement of the Gazan population into some island they are planning to build. It is horrendous. That we still sit here and debate the merits rather than actually say there will be immediacy in our actions is anathema to ourselves.

It has become a vogue at the moment for Israeli ministers and other Israeli people to write their names on bombs that will then be sent into the Gaza population. These are 2,000 lb plus bombs, which can destroy a space half the size of County Louth. This destroys any semblance of foreign policy achievement by the Irish Government. In 2022 the Irish Government brought together 82 signatories to sign the declaration on the use of large munitions in urban areas. It was a foreign policy achievement and it has been obliterated right before the Minister's eyes. The Government brought together the signatories of the enactment. Has the Minister no pride to stand up and remind the signatories of their responsibilities? Tomorrow we will table a motion that we join the ICJ case.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Peter Burke): From day one the Government has been very clear and unequivocal in our demands at home and abroad when engaging with partners in Europe and across the globe. We are calling for four actions: an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, urgent and effective humanitarian access, the protection of civilians, and the release of all hostages. I utterly condemn the violence committed in Israel and Gaza since 7 October and the disproportionate response we have seen coming from the Israeli Government in the intervening period.

Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas on earth. It is 41 km long and only 6 km wide. A total of 1.9 of the 2.1 million residents have been displaced, with over 25,000 people killed, 70% of whom are women and children. I condemn Israel for its collective punishment of the most vulnerable people in Gaza. The conditions there at present are inhumane and intolerable. We continue to assert maximum pressure through all available channels to put an end to this war and to get critical supplies to those who need them.

We have seen the wilful destruction of key infrastructure, schools and hospitals, and the denial of healthcare and humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable, including the elderly, young children and pregnant women. This is utterly reprehensible. Furthermore, it is thought that more than 400,000 people in Gaza are experiencing famine and starvation. The violence has done untold damage to the future achievement of a peaceful resolution and the international goal of a two-state solution. We will further see a cause for radicalisation of younger people in the region as they see less certainty for their future and homeland.

At EU level we have sought out like-minded countries to collaborate. We co-authored a letter with Belgium, Spain and Malta calling for a ceasefire ahead of the European Council last December. We have contributed to the strong stance from the UN, which received broad support from international partners during the emergency session of the General Assembly. It called for an immediate ceasefire, that humanitarian access be ensured, and the protection of civilians as is provided for under humanitarian law.

I have also raised our position at each of the General Affairs Council meetings in Brussels since the war broke out. The Tánaiste has done the same when visiting the Middle East and when travelling elsewhere, most recently calling for this at the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday and when meeting the German Foreign Minister last week.

The Irish Government and our diplomatic network are recognised for our strong positions, our reputation as peacekeepers and brokers and our efforts towards de-escalation. I have witnessed this first hand throughout the EU and at UN level. Unfortunately, we have seen things deteriorate further in the region with attacks on shipping in the Red Sea by Houthis in Yemen. This not only puts lives and crews in danger but it is having an increasingly serious impact on global trade. We have seen time and again that when trade is disrupted it is always the poorest and most vulnerable citizens who suffer the most. Thus, we have to intensively involve and work for de-escalation efforts, including in Yemen and Lebanon, as a widening conflict in the region could have devastating consequences.

Ireland is a long-standing supporter of the International Criminal Court, committing additional voluntary funding already this year of €3 million to assist its work, including in relation to Palestine. Last week the ICJ held hearings with South Africa and Israel, which are the parties to the case. We are following proceedings very closely as a government and will make a decision on whether to intervene after the court has made its preliminary decision, which is due

next week. This is the process of the court.

We have participated in two advisory opinion cases relating to Israel and the occupation of Palestine. One is ongoing. Ireland will participate in oral hearings in this case in The Hague next month, when the Attorney General is due to represent the Government.

The actions and the collective punishment in Gaza in recent months are reprehensible. The Government is doing everything it can, including at the recent European Council meetings on tangible sanctions against aggressive settlers in the West Bank. We heard the numbers articulated by the Tánaiste regarding 119 Palestinian households being displaced, 358 people dead and 91 children murdered as a result of this action. This is why the European Council needs to be strong and to put forward strong and robust sanctions to ensure Israel is held to account. We have to put faith in the process of the ICC. Ireland is a big supporter of the court through funding and through our diplomatic network.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and I commend the Tánaiste for bringing it before the House. It is a strong motion highlighting in explicit terms the scale of the violence, barbarity and inhumanity we see being played out before our eyes in real time in Gaza. The direct and indirect consequences on the lives of people who bear no blame for the atrocities commenced by Hamas on 7 October are unthinkable, from the bomb blast that blows a child's limbs apart to the amputation of damaged limbs without recourse to anaesthetic, from the unspeakable loss of parents mourning their children to the unbearable pain of mothers undergoing cesarean section without recourse to anaesthetic, and from slow deaths trapped under rubble to slow deaths through starvation or disease. These are atrocities. Whatever the provocation and however well-founded the anger, submitting entire populations to this level of barbarism cannot be justified either by Israel or by Hamas. Those perpetrating these actions will be harshly judged by history.

I acknowledge the strength of feeling of the Irish people on this subject and their feelings of solidarity for people not just in Gaza but the wider Palestinian people. We heard from the Tánaiste that we are seeing the situation in the West Bank rising to boiling point also. I stand with them and I feel the same sense of outrage. We know that "genocide" is one of the heaviest words in the English language. It is freighted with memories of peoples extinguished through the inhumanity of others. Deputy Boyd Barrett has referred to this previously, saying that the crime of genocide is the worst of the worst. I agree with him. I also agree with the Taoiseach when he says that precisely for this reason, and precisely because it is the worst of all crimes, we have to make sure we apply the term correctly.

We await the outcome of the preliminary hearings taken by South Africa at the ICJ. I welcome the commitment in the motion to consider strongly an intervention once the judgment is made. It is difficult to escape the conclusion, when one witnesses the obliteration of agricultural land, the flattening of schools, the elision of entire families, the destruction of historical records and the genocidal pronouncements of senior Israeli politicians, that the goal of at least some of the Israeli leadership is the erasure of an entire people and a nation.

I am reminded of a verse in the Book of Judges, which I believe is shared by Jews and Muslims in their holy books: "And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; and he took the city, and slew the people that was therein, and beat down the city, and sowed it with salt." We are seeing history repeat itself. Let us hope that international pressure can put an end to this terrible conflict and that we see a lasting ceasefire and the resumption of humanitarian aid, and

that we may work in the longer term towards a lasting peace through the two-state solution.

Deputy Colm Burke: I very much welcome the motion that has been brought forward. We have 2.1 million people living as hostages in a small area of land with no escape, no support, no access to medical care, no housing and no food. A total of 50% of the population is under the age of 19. This is a huge challenge in a state of 2.1 million people. There are 25,000 dead, 10,000 of whom are children. We then look at the West Bank, where more than 355 people have been killed, the vast majority by Israeli soldiers.

I was there in 2009 after Israel used the opportunity in the changeover of the US President in 2008 and 2009. In 22 days, 1,417 Palestinians were killed. There were 13 Israeli soldiers killed. It was 100 Palestinians for one Israeli. I am concerned that the same ratio will now be used. That seems to be what we are discussing. I condemn what occurred on 7 October, but this ratio would mean that there could be 120,000 people killed because no one, especially among the major powers, is shouting “Stop”. It is appalling that the arms trade is making megabucks from this conflict, which is coming from the major powers around the world because they are standing idly by and not intervening. I was in the food depots in 2009, where more than 900,000 people were receiving food in order to survive. Now, there is no access to food, so we will be dealing with starvation and disease. It is important that this conflict be stopped at the earliest opportunity.

I pay tribute to the Irish diplomatic corps, which is working tirelessly in Brussels and in the UN. It is only by bringing other countries on board with us that we can move together to stop what is occurring. This cannot continue. This is murder. There is no justification for what is occurring. Innocent people, including 10,000 children, have died. Of the people killed, 75% were women and children. It has to stop.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome the opportunity to discuss Gaza. The Government motion is a small step in the right direction, but it does not go anywhere near far enough. There is not one mention of a ceasefire anywhere in the motion. An immediate ceasefire is the one thing that will stop the slaughter of innocent civilians now.

What we are witnessing in Gaza is barbaric and inhumane. Let us be under no illusion - what we are witnessing is genocide. As good citizens, we are often asked to come forward and give testimony if we have witnessed a crime. I thank the more than 25,000 people who have taken the time to contact me and ask me and other Deputies to use our position to give testimony on their behalf. We are discussing this Government motion on Palestine because the Government was dragged to this position by the Irish people, who took to the streets in their hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands. The citizens of this country who lobbied me and all other TDs need to be commended.

Ireland has not only a moral obligation, but also a legal one under the 1948 genocide convention, to act to prevent the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. I note that the Government motion states that it will “strongly consider an intervention in the South Africa v Israel case at the ICJ ... following the necessary legal and policy analysis”. Other Deputies and I would like to see what this “necessary legal and policy analysis” looks like. I have not seen it yet. Ireland can take a case against Israel independently or join the South African ICJ case. Palestinian people do not have time for considerations. They are dying.

There is no time to lose as Israel’s indiscriminate bombing, shooting, starvation, dehydra-

tion and torture of Palestinian people continues at pace. Israel's denial of healthcare, communication, movement, shelter and the basic needs of children and adults in Gaza has shown no signs of letting up. More than 25,000 people have been killed in Gaza. This is collective punishment. This is a war crime. This is genocide. Every university in Gaza has been destroyed. For example, last week saw the controlled explosion of Israa University in south Gaza. The IDF had already commandeered the university as a military base. There was no reason for the IDF to have destroyed it other than to destroy future generations' chances of education.

Hospitals are targeted and medical staff are killed while treating patients. On average, more than ten children have lost one or both of their legs every day in Gaza since 7 October, with many amputations performed without anaesthesia. Just take a minute to let that sink in - children are having limbs amputated without pain relief. I do not know about the Minister of State, but my mind cannot comprehend that. Ms Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, the Irish lawyer on the South African case, raised the acronym WCNSF – wounded child, no surviving family. WCNSF was created by Israel. More than 100 journalists have been killed by Israel and, in many cases, we have seen the annihilation of entire families. Israel is using internationally banned weapons to shell civilians in the Gaza Strip. We have seen the mass displacement of nearly 2 million people. Now we are seeing induced famine as another form of collective punishment. On Saturday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected calls for Palestinian sovereignty. Basically, Israel will not stop until Palestine does not exist. I am from a party that supports a two-state solution, but Israel reneged on that from the get-go. Israel's apartheid regime existed long before 7 October. It has operated for decades. Before 7 October, illegal Israel settlements in Palestine were constant.

Ireland can do many things. Words are cheap - we need action. Ireland must support the South African case. Are the lives of Ukrainians worth more than Palestinians'? This is sheer hypocrisy and unacceptable. Ireland can simply recognise the state of Palestine. That is in the programme for Government. Now that it is in government, though, the Government has reneged on this promise. The Tánaiste's excuse - that he does not want Ireland to be an outlier - does not wash in this instance. One hundred and thirty-nine other countries around the world have recognised the state of Palestine. Ireland must join them. We can enact the occupied territories Bill. The Government must also divest itself urgently of investments in Israeli businesses operating in occupied Palestinian territories. There is plenty of condemnation in the Government motion, but condemnation without sanctions is futile.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Next is Deputy Boyd Barrett, who is sharing time with Deputy Barry.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government is trying to deliberately mislead the public and this House about its shameful failure to discharge its responsibilities under the genocide convention. On 22 November, People Before Profit tabled a motion in the Dáil through which we appealed to the Government to discharge its responsibilities under the convention, which I remind the Government are not about holding Israel accountable after the fact of a genocide, but about obliging us as signatories to prevent the commission of a genocide that is ongoing. The Government voted our resolution down. That is the truth. Shockingly, when I raised the matter the week before – it was the first time it was raised in the Dáil – the Government did not know the difference between the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice and gave excuses that related to the ICC but did not in any sense acknowledge the Government's responsibilities under the genocide convention.

At that point, 11,000 people had been murdered by Israel. There are now 25,000. That is 14,000 more people dead. There were 1 million people displaced at the time. There are now 2 million displaced. Some 75% of all homes in Gaza have been destroyed. Israel is levelling Gaza in front of the world. It is ticking every box under the genocide convention for the commission of genocide. Every single government, including our own, that signed the genocide convention and has failed to act to stop this genocide, initiate proceedings and impose sanctions against Israel for the commission of genocide should hang its head in shame. It is outrageous. What good will a case be in two years' time when the genocide is happening now?

The Government's motion continues with the attempts to partially justify Israel's actions. It refers to hostages that are held in Gaza by Hamas. It does not mention the thousands of Palestinians held hostage by Israel, many of whom were rounded up in the past three months and thousands more of whom were held hostage in the system of administrative detention long before that. There is no word about them being released or about the three Irish citizens, at least that I know of, including Zak Hania, being held hostage in Gaza by Israel. What is the Government doing about those people? There is no reference to them or to the dozens of families who are based here or who are citizens here and who are trying to get their loved ones out. Israel is holding them hostage as well. What is the Government doing about this? The answer is nothing.

Turning to the ICJ, the Government is still talking about only possibly supporting the South African action and using all sorts of excuses to justify its failure. What has Germany done? It has made a public statement to the effect that it is backing Israel. The United States has done the same, as has the UK. Ireland has not stated that it supports South Africa's call for these measures and that it commits to playing its part, including in the context of a requirement to take unilateral measures under the convention to sanction a state and prevent it from committing genocide.

Thousands of people will be outside the Dáil tomorrow night before the Government is forced to vote again on this issue. I encourage the public to take part in that protest, the purpose of which is to force the Government to discharge its responsibility to stop genocide.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Tánaiste is saying there would be no sense in boycotting the St. Patrick's Day trip. Let us have a quick look at this argument. The first argument put forward by the Tánaiste relates to why should we boycott when it is clear the US is trying to end the conflict. Clear to whom? Biden has pledged \$14.3 billion in military aid to Israel. As of Christmas Day, Israel had unloaded 230 planeloads and 20 shiploads of weapons from the US. The second argument implies that it would make no difference and that we have to engage. Israel would not be able to prosecute its war into next month were it not for the support, political, diplomatic, financial and military, it gets from the US. Ireland should do whatever it can to apply pressure for a change in US policy. This is an election year in the US. All the polls show that the race will be very tight. The Irish are one of the biggest minorities in the US. If the Taoiseach were to pick up the phone to the US President and relay the message that a St. Patrick's Day visit cannot go ahead as long as the US is supporting genocide, would this be a point of pressure, yes or no? Clearly, the answer is "Yes". It should be done.

I am not sure if a case would be in the process of being heard in The Hague were it not for the masses of ordinary black people in South Africa. It is an election year there. I am of the view that the African National Congress, which is in government in South Africa, took this case under pressure from below. The Irish Government needs to come under pressure from below. I

congratulate everyone who has taken part in the protests but these need to be stepped up in the weeks ahead. The Government has been very poor on the issue of this court case. Not only has it not fallen in and supported South Africa, but it has also actually criticised the people making the accusations and tried to undermine their case in trying to please the capitalist establishments in the US and the European Union.

The Government is feeling the pressure now. That pressure is showing in this debate. Some of the comments made by the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste about the Attorney General going to The Hague, about the validity of the South African case and so on show that the pressure is building on the Government. It is only going to continue to build. I encourage people to keep the pressure up.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I start by thanking the Tánaiste, his team and his officials for putting this motion together and giving us the opportunity to have a cross-party debate.

Sadly, we are in a much darker place than we were when last we were here condemning what is happening in Gaza. No matter what side of the House we sit on, we are watching horror unfold before our eyes. This is true not just of all of us in this Chamber but of all of us across the nation and the globe. Many of us feel helpless and want to shout “Stop”. Ireland has done this. We were one of the first countries to call for a ceasefire. The cold and brutal reality, though, is that others are benefiting from the horror happening in Gaza. The arms trade is profiteering and, in some places, politicians are garnering votes off the back of the killing of innocent civilians. That is absolutely sickening.

We live in an era of misinformation and disinformation. Facts have never been more important. The facts are that 25,000 people in Gaza have been killed since the Hamas attack on Israel and 70% of them have been women and children. Today, the biggest concerns of NGOs like Sadaka – The Ireland Palestine Alliance, is Gaza’s newest deadly threat, namely, starvation. The majority of people in Gaza are technically and actually experiencing real-life famine right now. This is in addition to having been displaced, to not having clean water and to living at ongoing risk of disease. The people of Palestine are under continuous deadly threats of attacks, of bombs and now of starvation.

Hamas killed Israelis on Israeli soil and it still holds 130 hostages. This is absolutely wrong, and I condemn it completely. It is indisputable that what Israel is doing is so far beyond disproportionate. I have spent time in Palestine and I have seen first-hand the utter disdain with which Israeli soldiers at point treated Palestinians in their own land. I cannot begin to imagine the pain and suffering that they are inflicting on a civilian population right now. The Tánaiste has been on the ground in the region and because of his work and the hard work of our officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs and our international collaborations, Irish hostages were released. This is why I reluctantly accept that we still need diplomatic channels in place even now with Israel. It is because, unfortunately, an ICJ ruling is not going to end this war. Only negotiations and diplomacy can do that.

Ireland has shown international leadership in this regard. We already have a court case holding Israel to account and our Attorney General will travel in a couple of weeks’ time to The Hague to give evidence there. Ireland was among the first countries to call for a ceasefire, and we are using our diplomatic channels to assert Palestinians’ right to assert their own state. We are providing practical support on the ground too in terms of aid and funding to NGOs and to institutions like the ICJ and the ICC, which need to hold Israel to account. Tonight, we are

confirming Ireland's commitment to saying "Stop" - stop the death and stop the destruction in Gaza. We are saying "Yes" to safe and unhindered humanitarian aid that is so needed in that area. Most importantly, though, we are saying that Ireland will support the ICJ's preliminary response and that once the case is filed we can then intervene, just as we did at that point with Russia and Ukraine.

The Israel Defense Forces' mission is defence and their goal is security. Imagine defence and security is their motto. What the Israel Defense Forces are doing right now, though, is immeasurably beyond defence and it is causing nothing but instability right across the region. The Israel Defense Forces are renowned for their precision and state-of-the-art technologies, yet 70% of the people they are killing are women and children. A country with that big of a defence budget and that well-trained of a defence force and with that capability of technology simply does not do that by accident. They do that on purpose. In my view, and I am not a lawyer or an international expert, that has to be genocide. This is why Ireland must support the institutions of the ICC and the ICJ and why, as soon as it is legally appropriate, we as a Government and as a nation must intervene in that case. This is how we will send a clear and strong international signal.

How we do not send a clear and international signal, by the way, is by fighting among ourselves about whether stopping the war and a ceasefire are the same things. That is not helpful and it is not unity. It is simply playing to the national gallery when right now we need to be playing to the international gallery. That must be our audience. Stopping the war or a ceasefire, whatever way we put it, Palestinians in Gaza have to stop dying. This is the goal. This is the shared goal. If it is the shared goal, then, let us get on the same page.

Meanwhile, as we have these incredible debates, people are dying. By the time we finish this debate today, 13 women will have given birth and those 13 babies will have been born into hell on earth, into utter destruction and devastation. Families are being wiped out, communities are being ravaged and schools and hospitals are being blown to bits. It has to stop and Ireland says "Stop". We have been a lonely voice internationally. Now, South Africa is that lonely voice and we must join it.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The overwhelming priority of the Irish Government is to continue to advocate for an immediate stop to the death and destruction in Gaza and to take relevant actions to this end. Through the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste, the Irish Government is doing everything it can to bring about an immediate, durable and sustainable humanitarian truce between Israel and Hamas. The only way to achieve this or any resolution for communities in Israel and Gaza is immediate de-escalation through regional and international diplomacy.

While Israel has the right to defend itself, I unequivocally condemn its deliberate infliction of all this death, injury, illness and suffering on the captive civilian population in Gaza. There is no justification for the collective punishment inflicted on the Palestinian people, with over 24,000 killed in Gaza in just three months. This includes more than 10,000 innocent children. I acknowledge our fellow Irish citizens' strength of feeling towards those who are oppressed in Gaza, the 1.9 million people who have been displaced, their homes and vital infrastructure, including educational facilities, destroyed. Starvation and famine are sweeping across Palestine and are being used by the Israelis as a weapon of war. Some 95% of the hungriest people in the world are now in Gaza. A lack of clean water and adequate sanitation and the collapse of the healthcare system is causing a public health disaster of contagious disease among nearly

2 million displaced Palestinians and 65% of the hospitals in Gaza are now shut, with the WHO warning of widespread death from preventable diseases.

The case for immediate ceasefire in Gaza is compelling and becomes clearer by the hour in light of the horrific and mounting death toll. Many around the world are calling for a ceasefire. Without an immediate ceasefire, more innocent children will die.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: At the outset, I should acknowledge the various Government TDs who have engaged with Sadaka. I refer to Deputies Higgins, Costello and Haughey and many others. This demonstrates the strength of feeling on the Government benches, which often goes unacknowledged.

Since I last spoke on the Palestinian situation, there has been an unacceptable deterioration and a catastrophic human disaster. Some 24,000 are dead and 1.9 million are displaced. There has been significant destruction of housing and infrastructure and famine is imminent. There is no doubt that, unfortunately and unacceptably, the international community has for decades allowed Israel's breaches of UN resolutions go unchecked. It is important to say that Ireland has never been party to that. Ireland's leadership on this issue is not being questioned internationally. Our position is clear and Israel knows it. Ireland, my party and I condemn the ongoing bombardment of Gaza by Israel. We have said it over and over again. In fact, we were one of the first countries in the world to say it. There must be an immediate ceasefire. We want unhindered access for humanitarian aid. Beyond Gaza, we condemn the violence against Palestinians in the West Bank and the Israeli announcements of funding for illegal settlements, a further breach of international law. We also demand the immediate and unconditional release of hostages held by armed groups in Gaza and the cessation of indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza into Israel. That is what a ceasefire is.

Ireland is monitoring what is happening at the ICJ. I refer not only to the South African case, but also to the other cases and investigations regarding Palestine. I welcome the Taoiseach's clarification that Ireland has submitted a strong, robust and substantial legal opinion to the international court and that, in February, the Attorney General will give Ireland's oral submission in the ICJ case. We know that third-party state interventions in such cases can only take place after the court has made its order. It is clear that Ireland will examine the judgment when it is made. That cannot be done before the order is issued and others in this House know that. The case for genocide cannot be won as you would prosecute an argument in a political debating chamber. It is a legal charge and needs legal argument. I am confident that Ireland will not stand by when that judgment is issued and there is an opportunity to act, just as the Irish people have not stood by and just as we did in respect of Ukraine.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: One in every 100 Gazans has now been killed. The death toll has reached over 25,000. That is an absolutely terrifying figure. It is actually a figure that is impossible to comprehend but we have to comprehend it because we need to understand the scale of the loss and the genocide that is unfolding in Gaza. I know that, during an tAire Stáit's time as Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, he got to know my home county of Galway. I will use it as an example. It is like every resident of Athenry, Barna, Clifden, Moycullen, Oranmore, Oughterard, Portumna and Ballinasloe all being wiped out in a four-month period. That is the scale of devastation visited upon those poor Palestinians currently in Gaza.

Yesterday, *The New York Times* said "The daily death toll in Gaza has fallen in half over the past month". That statement was met with absolute shock not because it was some kind of

new and important statistic or one that reflected that the end was finally in sight, but because most people wondered how we could even know that the number of deaths is falling. Israel has bombed every hospital in Gaza. No hospital in Gaza is fully functional. The infrastructure of the Gaza health ministry has been completely and utterly demolished. More UN workers have been killed in this conflict than in any other and more journalists, who report on the deaths, have been killed than in any other conflict since the Second World War.

We have all heard the genocidal statements made by Israel's Government. Its minister for defence declared that Israel was fighting human animals and that it would eliminate everything. The country's Prime Minister said it was fighting Amalek, the biblical tribe God supposedly commanded be completely eradicated. However, what the Irish people, including the hundreds of thousands of them who have protested against the genocide unfolding in Gaza, see is a proud but defenceless population of Gazans who are currently undergoing a genocide, a population that has long been starved, subjugated and stripped of their most basic human rights and dignity. One in four are now at risk of starvation. The entire population of Gaza is at risk of famine. Women are having to give birth through Caesarean section without anaesthetic, resulting in emergency hysterectomies and death. On average, more than ten children every single day since 7 October have lost one or both of their legs. Many have had to undergo amputations without the use of anaesthetic. What kind of cruel world do we live in that allows that to continue without the international community actively doing anything about it? This is a crime against a humanity and the shame of the world.

I am shocked at this Government's lack of action. It was one of the first governments of a western nation to speak out but only a week ago the Taoiseach was ruling out actively supporting South Africa's case. There appears to have been some kind of shift in the Government's approach but only as a result of the public outrage at its lack of action or, perhaps, because another EU nation, Belgium, has now stepped forward to say it supports South Africa. I give credit where it is due to Belgium, but the latter is a former colonial power and it would have been far more fitting if we had been the first. We should have been the first and we should continue that support now given our history as the first western nation to oppose apartheid in South Africa. We can be thankful that Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh is part of the South African legal team. As a result, many Irish people felt that we were there in spirit. We are a signatory to the genocide convention and, as such, we are obliged to do everything we can to prevent the risk of genocide. Trócaire has said that this humanitarian disaster is without parallel or precedent.

A week ago, the last remaining university in Gaza was levelled. Of course, it is no surprise that Israel is denying access to education just as it is denying the lives of the people of Gaza. It is trying to destroy their education. It is destroying their lives and history. We need to support South Africa's brave actions. The Government initially talked the talk but it must walk the walk, support South Africa and say "Stop the genocide".

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In Gaza, 25,000 individual human beings have been murdered since the horrendous attacks by Hamas on 7 October. This is the equivalent of every man, woman and child in a large Irish town such as Tralee being killed. More than 10,000 children have been killed in those attacks. That is the equivalent of 416 classrooms of innocent children murdered in that time. Women and children have been the main victims of Israel's war, with more than 16,000 of them killed. It is estimated that two mothers have been killed every hour since the start of the war. Journalists and humanitarian staff have been killed in massive numbers. Israel's war has been completely and purposefully indiscriminate in recent months. In an area half the size of County Louth, Ireland's smallest county, 1.9 million people are now

displaced and without homes. Close to 1 million of them are women and girls who are seeking shelter and safety. Schools and hospitals have been vaporised and the rules of war have been completely dumped by the Israel Defence Forces. People are purposefully being deprived of safety, medicine, healthcare and shelter. By its own admission, Israel has been preventing food and water from reaching more than 1 million people in the area. This is shocking. We have seen a famine made by the Israeli Government famine start to spread throughout the statelet.

On any examination of the evidence, it is impossible to say this is accidental. All the evidence shows this human terror is, in fact, the purposeful collateral damage of the Israeli Government. There is no other way to view the actions that are unfolding in Gaza. This horror is being manufactured by Israel. For all of this, Israel is responsible. Collective punishment on a biblical scale is happening in our time. The shocking thing is there has been no accountability for it. The shocking element is that most of the West has stood on its hands. Indeed, the US, the EU and Britain have given Israel a blank cheque to do what it is doing. This is a deep stain on the US, the EU and Britain. That they have lost any moral authority in the context of future of international conflicts is obvious. Now we are seeing the spread of the war to other countries, such as Yemen. There have been direct attacks on Iranian army personnel in Syria and attacks in south Lebanon have continued.

The Government, too, has a responsibility. It has outsourced its foreign policy in this regard to the EU. There is no legal responsibility on the Government to outsource its foreign policy on this matter to the EU. Under the EU treaties, foreign policy is still a national competency. Why has the Government outsourced its policy, especially in light of the fact that the EU has grossly distorted our foreign policy message? It might have been understandable for the Government to have decided to collectively work with the EU if the EU's policy on this matter was in some way reflective of our objectives. However, the EU has grossly distorted this in the context of giving a blank cheque to the Israeli Government. Ursula von der Leyen went to the US and said the EU stood with the US in supporting Israel's right to wage war so horrendously on Gaza.

We have had words from the Government, and I welcome some of the words from Government TDs today, but we need actions. Words are not making a squat of difference in this matter. We need to recognise the state of Palestine. That is a must for the Government. We need to support the case of South Africa. We need to leverage the special relationship we have with the US, which is the most powerful player in all of this. When the initial phases of the conflict broke out, the US moved aircraft carriers to the eastern Mediterranean to underline its support for what was about to commence. We are not leveraging our special relationship with the US in any way whatsoever. One of the reasons we are not doing so is because this country has commercial interests in all this. It is hypocritical to say otherwise. The Government fawned over the Chinese Premier last year despite the horrendous treatment of the Uyghur population in the Xinjiang province. It is amazing that the Government has been so selective in terms of the delivery of foreign policy in the past five years - selective because of commercial interests. That is one of the reasons the Government is not properly leveraging its relationship with the US Government on this matter. It also needs to stand up to the disastrous EU policy. It is horrendous that EU leaders have got away with the language they have used in recent months.

Obviously, Ireland is a small country. Our effect on international affairs can be quite small, but we have a competency in the context of peace processes. We are internationally recognised as an honest broker. We should have capitalised on the statements from the EU some months ago, when it sought to create an international peace conference and force Israel to participate in that conference. In fact, when Israeli diplomats were asked whether Israel would participate in

that international peace conference, they stated they had no detail and it was a nebulous offer from the EU. This country could have created that detail, however. We could have, at least, prevented excuses from coming from Israel in respect of peace. There must be a peaceful political resolution to this but that will not happen until the blank cheque is pulled from Israel, the international community decides to tolerate it no more and the Government stands up with action rather than words.

Deputy Patrick Costello: We have spoken a lot about genocide. It is important to underline that genocide turns on intention to kill or destroy. It is not about the numbers, the method used or the time it takes to happen. Before the current brutal phase of this long conflict, we saw the brutality of the occupation, with settlement building by Israel in contravention of international law, land confiscations, land closures and house demolitions. We have seen a military occupation that is brutalising and dehumanising to Palestinians. This has been going on since 1948 and 1967. Analysis by the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions, an Israeli NGO, in respect of these house demolitions and land clearances states:

The motivation for demolishing these homes is purely political, and racially informed: to either drive the Palestinians out of the country altogether or to confine the four million residents of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza to small, crowded, impoverished and disconnected enclaves ...

The latter is the imposition of a way of life designed to destroy, in part, the Palestinian people with deliberate intent. That alone, even before we look at what has been happening in recent months, meets the criteria for an investigation of the crime of genocide. We were already looking at a slow-motion genocide. Now, of course, it is significantly more brutal. It is on our television screens. As stated at the ICJ, the victims are now filming their own death and genocide. We can see the cruelty, inhumanity and brutality at first hand. However, the bombs will stop eventually. What will be left after that? It will be occupation and apartheid. The occupation is not going anywhere. There is no action happening to challenge that occupation.

6 o'clock

Other Deputies have spoken about the impunity Israel is facing. We need to do more. We need to step up, move beyond words and do more. Ireland has been very involved in and supportive of the advisory opinion case at the ICJ, which started back in December 2022, I think, and is finally coming to fruition in terms of oral arguments this February. Will the Attorney General talk about the settlements, the house demolitions and the land confiscations, all of which have been designed to force a quiet transfer on Palestinian people? We know this because that is what the Israeli state representatives themselves say. Benjamin Netanyahu has been very clear that from the river to the sea will be Israeli and will be an Israeli state and there will be no Palestinian state. What is that if not genocidal language? Will the Attorney General raise the crime of apartheid we are seeing every day when he is on his feet in the Hague in February? We need to see that and hear those words spoken and we do need to do more.

Recognition of Palestine is in the programme for Government. It is couched in language of when the time is right and when it will facilitate peace. It is couched in conditionals. If we are not going to recognise Palestine now, when are we going to do it? If we do not do it now, very soon there will be no Palestine left to recognise. We have been strong in some of our words. We have been strong in the engagement with the advisory opinion case. We need to do significantly more if we are going to address the brutal reality that Palestinians are living under.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: It was a former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, describing what the United Nations was about, who said it was not created in order to bring us to heaven but in order to save us from hell. If there is one thing clear from my constituents, it is that the Middle East is in absolute hell right now. What people in my constituency want is for the war to end and for the hostages to be freed as the very first step. The issue I would like to raise is the lack of authority of the United Nations and the lack of mandate it appears to have to bring about that peace and to stop that hell. The paralysis that is very clear in the Security Council, when the United Nations is unable to act effectively in Ukraine and now in the Middle East, is a cause of grievous concern for the vast majority of people who speak to me. The world is now a much more dangerous place because of all these troubles and because of the lack of determination internationally to stop this war and bring about peace.

Absent from some contributions to this debate is the question of who caused this initial trouble. It was Hamas who went in and who raped, murdered and killed 1,500 people in cold blood. It had absolutely no mandate and no reason to do it. The reaction from Israel has been equally and just as bad as what Hamas did. I believe, and it is the Government's objective, that both Israel and Hamas must be held accountable for any and all violations of international humanitarian law, including potential war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ireland fully supports the investigation of this by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, which is vital to ensure accountability. We need to go back to what I said initially, and we must use all our efforts through the United Nations, through our Government contacts and through all parties in this House and none to ensure the war stops now. Some of the debate has been about whether this is a collective punishment, whether it is ethnic cleansing, or whether it is daily massacres and indiscriminate slaughter. It is all and each and every one of those. We are just appalled by the killing, the serious injury, the destruction of living conditions and the famine that is close to the door now of many people in Palestine. I welcome this debate. I like to think we would agree and unite in this House on the two main aims and that, whatever divisions there might be about defining different words, we want the killing to stop, we want the war to end and we want the Government to continue to use every potential, every door and every access it has to ensure this happens.

Deputy John Lahart: Despite significant international pressure for a ceasefire, Israel continues to conduct intensive military operations in the Gaza Strip. The death toll, as we know, is in excess of 25,000 people, approximately, including many children and their mothers. While the sympathy of the international community sided universally with Israel following the horrendous events in October, Israel's response has already passed the point of exhausting international sentiment. The Irish Government has been right to pursue a common EU approach and I commend the Tánaiste on his tireless work in seeking diplomatic solutions. It is clear the Israeli Prime Minister is in no mood for compromises or negotiated settlements, or even a two-state solution. Time and again his Government advised Palestinians to leave their settlements for alternative areas of refuge, only to raze those same areas to the ground, including hospitals. Does the Israeli Government care for what Ireland thinks? It is clear the Israeli Government has little regard for the views of even its greatest ally. However, others in the world do care for what we think.

While I support the Government's call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, it troubles me greatly what lies beyond such a ceasefire. Is it a simple return to the blanket pummelling of innocent children and women once again? The Tánaiste on his visit to Israel made clear that the view of the Irish Government is that the notion that Hamas can be defeated is fanciful. Israel

is no doubt familiar with 800 years of Irish history in that regard, yet Israel persists. The war being waged by Israel is now completely disproportionate and would suggest that its objective is the obliteration of Gaza as a political entity and ensuring that by destroying the infrastructure, Palestinians will no longer be able to live there again. Since the Hamas attack, which I roundly condemn, our Government is playing a role of which we can all be proud. However, for so many people there is still too much talk internationally. The military campaign simply has to stop. We know from recent history that ultimately what shamed another country, South Africa, into change was when the world turned its face away from it.

Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* captured the torment of the Jews of Europe. The powerful sentiments attributed to Shylock can be directly ascribed now to Gaza, 500 years later:

I am a [Palestinian]. Hath
not a [Palestinian] eyes? hath not a [Palestinian] hands, organs,
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer [...]?
If you prick [a Palestinian], do [they] not bleed?
if you tickle [them], do [they] not laugh? if you poison
[them], do [they] not die? and if you wrong [them], shall [they] not
revenge? If [they] are like you in the rest, [they] will
resemble you in that. If [you] wrong a Christian,
what is his humility? Revenge. [So what should]
[the sufferance of a Palestinian be by example?] Why, revenge. The villainy you
teach [Palestinians], [they] will execute, and it shall go hard but [they]
[may] better the instruction.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I support the Social Democrats original motion and thank the party for bringing it before us. I also thank the groups in Killarney and Tralee and throughout Kerry who have rightly expressed their outrage at what is happening. This motion paints a harrowing picture of the war in Gaza, highlighting the dire humanitarian crisis and the urgent need for peace. It underscores the devastating impact of the conflict on the Palestinian population, including the loss of life, displacement, and the collapse of essential services. The motion rightly calls for an end to the violence and for the international community to uphold its obligation under the Genocide Convention. The Hamas-run authorities say 25,000 civilians and fighters have died. According to the UN, another 7,000 may lie under the rubble. Israel says it has killed 8,000 terrorists, but far too little water, food and medicine is reaching Gaza and there are truly no safe zones for civilians. Mr. Netanyahu is said to have no post-war plan other than anarchy or occupation. Extremists within his coalition talk outrageously of permanently

displacing Palestinians from the enclave.

The Rural Independent Group TDs believe that long-term peace in the Middle East can only be achieved through dialogue and negotiation. While the motion calls for urgent intervention, it is equally important to stress the need for dialogue and negotiation between the conflicting parties, as a sustainable solution can only be reached through mutual understanding and compromise. While the motion focuses on Ireland's role, it is essential to underscore the responsibility of other nations, especially those with more influence in the region, to contribute to peace efforts. These include the Arab countries and, of course, the US. While the motion addresses the immediate crisis, it is crucial to discuss the long-term solutions, such as addressing the root cause of the conflict, ensuring respect for human rights and working towards a two-state solution.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Nearly 100,000 Palestinians have been killed, reported missing or wounded in Gaza since Israel began its military operation three months ago. Among that number are 25,000 people who have been confirmed dead, two thirds of whom are women and children. Eighty-five percent of the population has been displaced. The healthcare system has collapsed, and operations like amputations and Caesarean sections are being performed without anaesthetic or any form of pain relief. What has this world come to?

A ceasefire is needed. Israel needs to be held accountable, as do the other parties involved. Hamas terrorist organisations must also be held accountable in the same way as Israel. The last time I spoke on this issue, I was falsely taken as not having condemned the actions of Israel. I do condemn the actions of Israel, as I do those of Hamas. I also stand by the decision not to dismiss the ambassador of Israel to Ireland because, when in a position of war, channels of communication are vital. Those wanting to close such channels would make working towards peace impossible. It is something I stand by. All parties should be held accountable for their inhumane actions. I did not support the calls for the dismissal of an ambassador who was our only channel of communication at a time when we needed help rescuing Irish people in Gaza. I stand by that. I will stand by that in the future. We have to keep communication lines open to ensure peace. I also stand by the fact that Israel and Hamas must be held accountable. We must do everything in our power across the floor of this House and across the world to make sure they are held accountable. Foremost, I want peace. The killing must stop. We must stop people - women and children - from having to go through operations and amputations without any form of pain relief or anaesthetic. That is not what Ireland is about. Ireland wants peace. I will do anything I can to help get that peace.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I, too, believe that the situation underscores the urgent need for peace, not war. We would much rather see the Irish Government step up its effort to bring about a peaceful ceasefire. The pursuit of peace and justice should always be our guiding principles, regardless of the complexities of international law and optics.

I condemn utterly the actions of Hamas on that fateful day in October. I unreservedly condemn the massive overreaction of Israel. It will not even listen to its allies in the United States. Now we have game-playing, with motions being brought forward and the South African situation. Goodness knows, they know enough about trouble and apartheid and everything else. Sense has to prevail here. The destruction, torture, killing and slaughter of women, children, whole families and communities has to stop. What I cannot understand at all is the barbaric nature of the movement of people into an area - and it is a tiny bit of land anyway - and the bombardment of it after that. I do not know how you could not call it genocide.

We are being inundated with emails. You would think we are all powerful and we can do a lot, but Ireland has always been a neutral country. We must maintain our neutrality and must work, as we have respect all over the world for punching above our weight, in trying to bring about a ceasefire. The EU must also do more. Indeed, what sickens and saddens me is the amount of armoury and armaments and the whole industry around that. Apparently, these people want a war every ten or 15 years to ensure they can offload their supplies and create new lethal weapons. We must do our best to stop this savage, barbaric war.

Deputy Joan Collins: I am speaking on behalf of the Independent Group. As we speak, Israel is assaulting the Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, a city it previously declared as a safe zone for refugees. This is not the first atrocity we have seen Israel commit since it invaded Gaza and it will not be the last. It is just one of the many atrocities against civilians we have witnessed, and will witness, as the Israeli state wages war against the captive, starving civilian population of Gaza. To my mind, it is clear now that what we are witnessing is genocide. We are a signatory of the Genocide Convention. We have a legal obligation to prevent genocide. More than that, we have a moral obligation to do everything we can to prevent the annihilation of Gaza and its people. That, to my mind, is exactly what we are witnessing.

When South Africa's case was heard by the International Court of Justice, the Taoiseach called it complex and a far from clear-cut case of genocide, excusing why this Government has failed in its legal and moral duty to prevent genocide by joining the case. I will describe what the Israeli Government thinks of its own campaign of murder and destruction, through the calls to genocide from the Israeli Government and army. On 12 October, the President of Israel said:

It's an entire nation out there that is responsible. This rhetoric about civilians not aware, not involved, it's absolutely not true.

On 28 October, Benjamin Netanyahu stated:

You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible. And we do remember.

He was referencing the total destruction of Amalek by the Israelites and the Bible passage that reads "Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings". On 7 October, the deputy speaker of the Knesset said, "Now we all have one common goal - erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the Earth." On 9 October, the Minister of Defence said, "We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly." On 1 November, the Minister of Heritage said the north of the Gaza Strip is more beautiful than ever. Everything is blown up and flattened, simply a pleasure for the eyes. On 11 November, the Minister of Agriculture said, "We are now rolling out the Gaza Nakba." On 9 October, the Israeli army Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories said "no electricity, no water, just damage. You wanted hell, you will get hell". On 12 October an Israeli army major-general said, "The State of Israel has no choice but to turn Gaza into a place where it is temporarily or permanently impossible to live in."

That is what the Israeli Government and army are saying. The Israeli Government and army have been calling for genocide since day one. They have publicly and openly said it and the Irish Government is ignoring it. To my understanding, it is a clear case of genocide. It is staring the Government in the face and it is refusing to do all it can to stop it. One of the things it can do is to recognise the state of Palestine and another is signalling its support for the South African application. We have obviously done a lot of work already, considering the case is before the

International Criminal Court and the fact the Attorney General is going over in February. We have enough of the work done.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have to say that I am disappointed. We should be here today with one voice and one motion that should unequivocally condemn the actions of Israel. Of course, I am on the record as condemning Hamas, but we are way beyond that now. The figures have been mentioned already. Some 25,295 Palestinians have been killed. Just yesterday, four Palestinians were struck and killed as they were trying to recover corpses in Khan Younis, and so on. We stand here today with a speech from the Tánaiste and a motion that bears no reality in relation to what we should be doing as an independent Republic and a sovereign state. We should be showing leadership as a neutral country. Instead of that, we are playing games.

I welcome the speeches of Government backbenchers. Clearly, the Government itself is out of touch with its own backbenchers, and certainly out of touch with the protestors who have filled the streets of Dublin, Galway, where I have attended every protest, and Killarney. They are telling us to use our voices to stop the slaughter, yet the Government cannot agree with us on a clear motion stating that what Israel is doing is wrong. In fact, while it condemns the ongoing bombardment of Gaza, you would think the bombs were just dropping from the sky. Israel fails to be mentioned.

Turning to the submission to the ICJ, I thank South Africa and its legal team. We have been quoting the President of Israel, its Prime Minister and its various ministers, and that is completely set out the document. When we talk about a two-state solution, which the Tánaiste has said he believes in, I will quote what one of the Ministers have said:

[When] they return here [they] will find scorched earth. No houses, no agriculture, no nothing. They have no future.

That is what has been clearly set out by the leaders of Israel, from top to bottom, yet we cannot agree on a motion that sets that out. If we look on Israel as our friend, it is our duty, not just under the genocide convention, to tell our friends that what they are doing is wrong. To equate our criticism and condemnation of the actions of the Israeli Government and the army to antisemitism is completely out of bounds. It is unacceptable to do that. It is an insult to the Jewish people and to the brave Jewish people who have come out, at great cost to themselves, and said that what the Israeli Government is doing in their name is absolutely wrong.

I ask the Minister of State to read the submission by South Africa. At the very least, we should be supporting and lauding it for having the courage to make this submission. We should have one motion in all our names; that is the message that should be going out to Israel and the Israeli ambassador. That is not the same as being anti-Jewish; it is pro-Jewish, pro-Palestine and pro-life. It is an absolute obscenity for the Tánaiste to have said in his contribution that the people of Palestine can wait no longer when that is exactly what we are allowing to happen.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: The omission from the motion of the word “ceasefire” is a lesson in political semantics that shows how disingenuous the motion is. Language is absolutely important when it is all we have, and that is thanks to the enormous lack of meaningful action. That anyone in this House would be unsure as to whether Netanyahu and his government are in the process of committing genocide is absolutely ridiculous. After the slaughter of 25,000 Palestinians, 10,000 of them children, the injury of 62,000 more and the displacement of 1.9 million, how can anyone be unsure of the amoral guilt of Netanyahu and his govern-

ment? I am not sure what level of proof of the genocide this Government needs. I think that if Netanyahu were to arrive at the Tánaiste's office to tell him he was committing genocide, he would still sit there with a wait-and-see attitude for the judgement on South Africa's case. Wait and see for what - the complete eradication of the Palestinian people from the face of this earth?

The Government's refusal to take any meaningful action on the atrocities Israel is committing in Palestine is an act of complicity - end of - which, given this nation's history of occupation and subjugation, is shameful. The decision as to whether to join South Africa's case goes beyond supporting Palestine. This nation has a history of siding with the oppressed rather than the oppressor and, despite the many emotive words of shock and horror coming from this House, Ireland has sided with the oppressor.

I listened with intent to the Taoiseach's comments during Leaders' Questions in respect of the Attorney General, who will travel to The Hague in person, but not until 22 February. It should not have to be said this level of injustice we have been witnessing requires immediate action, with no more of the wait-and-see. Regretful complicity is still complicity, and future generations will remember the Government for what it did not do while children lay dying on the other side of the world.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank all the Deputies for their interventions and their sustained interest and concern about the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory in Israel. I welcome this opportunity to address the House on the events of recent weeks and Ireland's ongoing engagement.

The escalation of violence and the effects on life in the region are appalling. The scale of the tragedy unfolding before us has affected everyone. We have all seen the incredibly distressing images on our screens night after night of families, including children, suffering the most unimaginable hardship. Since this House last discussed the situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, it is clear the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip has worsened considerably. The number of people in the Gaza Strip estimated to have been killed since 7 October now stands at over 25,000, while many more have been injured and the vast majority of the population have been displaced. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs currently cites reports that over 60% of Gaza's housing units have been destroyed or damaged. Only 16 of the 36 hospitals in Gaza remain partially functional. Water availability in Gaza continues to diminish, with municipals' wells operating at a mere one tenth of their capacity, and desalination plants at 7% of their capacity prior to the escalation of hostilities.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is now very grave. This catastrophic situation is worsening by the day. There is considerable risk to the lives of so many in Gaza, not only from the violence of Israel's actions but also from the lack of food, clean water, power and sanitation. Last week, the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, called the destruction caused by Israeli military operations heartbreaking and utterly unacceptable. There is simply not enough humanitarian aid getting to people in Gaza. Humanitarian aid is needed on a much larger scale than is currently being allowed, and it is imperative that access to water, food, medicine and power be increased significantly. The situation in Gaza cannot be allowed to deteriorate further and it is absolutely necessary that supplies be allowed to reach those who most need them.

It is also important to recall that the Government condemned the actions of Hamas on 7 October that began this escalation of hostilities. Everyone should denounce the horrifying

violence committed on that day, and the Government continues to call on Hamas to release the hostages who have now been held in captivity for more than three months and to stop indiscriminate rocket fire.

The Government is also deeply concerned by the situation in the West Bank. We have seen a drastic increase in the level of violence since 7 October and the current UN reports are that 358 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank, including eight people who have been killed by violent settlers. The year 2023 marked the highest number of Palestinians killed in the West Bank since UN records began in 2005. Ireland has been consistent in raising this issue of settler violence in our interactions with the Israeli authorities.

The heightened tensions throughout the region are now extremely concerning, including on the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon. In the Red Sea, attacks on shipping by the Houthis are putting the lives of civilian crews in danger and having a significant impact on global trade. It is imperative we do our utmost to avoid any potential further escalation of conflict in the region, which could be catastrophic.

As the Tánaiste said in his contribution, Ireland continues to be a leading voice in the European Union calling for a durable humanitarian ceasefire. This week, he attended a meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, which focused on the situation in the Middle East. The discussions featured the participation of the Palestinian and Israeli foreign ministers, as well as those from Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The Tánaiste's contributions at the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council focused on the need for the EU to speak clearly and consistently in support of a durable ceasefire. Unfortunately, despite this being the position of most member states, it has not been possible to agree on a common EU position in support of a ceasefire. The current position of the EU to call for humanitarian pauses is not enough. Both the Taoiseach at the European Council and the Tánaiste at the Foreign Affairs Council have advocated very strongly for agreement among member states in recent weeks to call for the durable ceasefire the people of Gaza so desperately need.

We will continue to lead calls, and advocate with like-minded EU member states, for stronger and clearer common policies reflecting the EU's fundamental values, including our commitment to peace. Ireland is firm that the EU should play a role in encouraging both an immediate ceasefire and the restoration of a long-term political horizon, and I welcome the engagement of Arab partners, as well as the US and others, to bring about an end to the current violence and to consider practical options to develop a longer term political horizon. The ultimate goal of peace and security for all the people of Israel and Palestine can only be achieved through dialogue and a meaningful peace process. The Government continues to prioritise supporting legitimate pathways to a lasting peace in all its interactions.

At the United Nations General Assembly, and across our involvement in international organisations, the Government has made Ireland's position and commitment to peace clear. Ireland supported the UN General Assembly resolutions that called for a ceasefire. We continue to use our voice and our support for multilateralism to call for an end to this violence and an end to the deaths and suffering of civilians. Ireland is a strong supporter of international law and we have been firm that the system should provide accountability. We have been clear that all actors, including non-state actors, have binding obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, which prohibits the targeting of civilians.

Israel's right to self-defence can only be exercised in line with international humanitarian

law. The principles of distinction, precaution and proportionality, as well as the prohibition on collective punishment apply, as they do in all armed conflicts. I have heard the comments that have been made today regarding the case South Africa has taken at the International Court of Justice. The Tánaiste has outlined the approach Ireland will take in the coming weeks following the decision on the provisional measures and after the filing of a memorial by the applicant, South Africa. These decisions will need careful consideration and, in such circumstances, it is the responsible course of action to take decisions following a legal analysis, as we have done in many previous cases.

I agree with the sense of urgency in this House to act to prevent further bloodshed. That is what Ireland is doing. We will continue to argue for the cessation of hostilities. We will utilise our role in the EU and the United Nations. Ireland will continue to lead within the EU and internationally. We will continue to raise our concerns with regional governments and in our interactions around the world. We will continue to draw on our own peace process experience to advocate for a more stable, prosperous future for the region.

Amendment put.

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

Housing and Homeless Prevention: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

- with escalating alarm, the ever-deepening homelessness crisis;
- that in November 2023 13,514 people, including 4,105 children, were in Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage funded emergency accommodation;
- that when all hostels and rough sleepers are included the true level of homelessness is closer to 20,000 people;
- that these figures do not include the tens of thousands of people sofa surfing or living in inadequate and inappropriate accommodation; and
- that the increased activity of investment funds, such as bulk purchasing of properties and increased rents, is driving further numbers of people into homelessness from the private rental sector;

further notes with concern that:

- the most recent report from the Health Research Board stated that 121 people experiencing homelessness died prematurely in 2021;

— the recommendations of the 2020 Interim Report on Mortality Amongst Single Homeless Population remain mostly unimplemented; and

— homeless charities are raising the alarm that homelessness and deaths of people experiencing homelessness are likely to rise in the time ahead;

condemns the fact that:

— since Fine Gael took office in 2011 homelessness has increased by 254 per cent and child homelessness by 540 per cent;

— since the current Government took office homelessness has increased by 61 per cent and child homelessness by 74 per cent; and

— the Government will not meet its obligations under the Lisbon Declaration to end long-term homelessness by 2030; and

agrees:

— that the Government bring forward measures to effectively ban investment funds from bulk purchasing homes that would otherwise be available to home buyers, local authorities or Approved Housing Bodies; and these measures must include increased stamp duty on such bulk purchases;

— to increase targets and accelerate the delivery of social and affordable housing;

— to the use of emergency planning and procurement powers and new building technologies and vacant homes to deliver an additional stream of social housing specifically for those in emergency accommodation or at risk of homelessness;

— to end homelessness amongst those aged over 55 years and significantly reduce family and child homelessness;

— that the annual target for the delivery of Housing First tenancies must be doubled to 500;

— that any funds saved from reductions in the numbers of people in emergency accommodation should be redirected to homeless prevention to further reduce the numbers of people experiencing homelessness;

— to expand and accelerate the tenant-in-situ schemes for social and affordable housing to reduce the risk of homelessness;

— to increase funding for the provision of domestic violence refuge places; and

— to reintroduce the temporary ban on no fault evictions until there is a meaningful reduction in the numbers of people in emergency accommodation.

Some 13,514 people, including 4,105 children, were officially recorded as being in emergency accommodation funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in November of last year. As each month passes and these numbers rise, I keep asking myself a question: how much worse does it have to get before this Government accepts that what it is doing to tackle the homelessness crisis is not working and it needs a change of approach?

As the Minister will know, Fine Gael has been in government for 12 years and during that period, the increase in homelessness has been astonishing. Homelessness among all categories of people has gone up by 254%, but child homelessness is up an astonishing 540%. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of children have been rendered homeless and have been forced to live in emergency accommodation during that period. For a significant period of that time, the Minister was supporting Fine Gael policy as part of a confidence and supply arrangement. Even in the three and a half years this Government has been in power and the Minister has held office, homelessness has gone up by 61% and child homelessness has gone up by 74%.

Those numbers do not begin to express the enormous impact on adults and, in particular, children who are being forced from their homes and into emergency accommodation. Not a day goes by without the Minister telling us about the increase in overall housing output last year, but we are still seeing the homeless numbers rise to the highest levels in modern times. Why? The answer is very simple. It is because the Government's social housing targets are too low, and year after year after year it has been missing them.

In fact, those figures - 13,500 people and 4,000 children - are not reflective of the real level of homelessness. The Minister knows that as well as I do because there are women and children in domestic violence refuges funded by Tusla. There are men and women in hostels that receive no State funding. There are rough sleepers. A growing number of people who have been through the direct provision system, and have been granted leave to remain, are trapped in direct provision and are unable to get out because it is essentially being used as emergency accommodation. When you add all those people up - this is from various Government sources - the actual real level of homelessness is somewhere closer to 20,000. That is before we even start talking about those who are sofa surfing.

If the Minister is to have any chance of meeting the targets in the Lisbon declaration on ending homelessness by 2030, he needs to change. The purpose of tabling this motion today is not only to remind the Minister of his failures to date, but also to set out alternative policy options he could consider. What could he do? He could increase and accelerate the delivery of much-needed social homes. He could raise the targets and meet those raised targets. He could use emergency planning and procurement powers and new building technologies in vacant homes to provide an additional supply of social and affordable homes, specifically targeting groups of people in emergency accommodation, such as the over 55s and families with children. He could double the volume of Housing First tenancies and ensure the entry criteria are more accessible. That would start to tackle the more than 6,000 single people in long-term homelessness. He could accelerate and expand the tenant *in situ* scheme. I tell him over and over again that the cost-rental tenant *in situ* scheme still is not working. He knows that. There had been improvements, which we acknowledged, to the social tenant *in situ* scheme, but it is such a shame the Minister waited such a long time to introduce them, and more can be done.

The Minister could reintroduce the ban on no-fault evictions. I know he is opposed to it, but it is still our view that it should be there. He could also end the practice of institutional investors - vulture funds - buying up homes. Leo Varadkar said in 2021 that the Government wanted to stop that practice to prevent those funds from buying up family homes and, in some instances, homes that could be used for social or affordable housing, including for families in emergency accommodation.

When it comes to homelessness, of all of the bad policies the Minister has presided over and of all the housing failures for which this Government, the confidence and supply Government

and the Fine Gael Government before it are responsible, the astonishingly high levels of homelessness speak for themselves. We urgently need change. I do not expect that the Minister will endorse any of the proposals we have outlined. I do not believe he will do anything differently, and that is ultimately why we need a change of government. I go back to the question I raised at the start: how long does this have to go on for, and how bad does this have to get, before the Minister starts to change? On that basis alone, I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This Government has been in office for nearly four years. The housing crisis is getting worse under the Government, as we heard Deputy Ó Broin outline. Of that there is no question. If soaring rents and rising house prices were not enough for struggling homebuyers to contend with, they are now forced to compete with investment funds that have more financial power than they could ever hope to have. It is a competition they simply cannot win because the rules of the game are rigged against them.

Two weeks ago we learned of an investment fund that snapped up 85% of an entire housing development in Balgriffin, Dublin 17. These were 46 homes that should have been available for workers and families to buy, to live in and to call their own. Instead, what is happening? They are being rented out by an investment fund for more than €3,100 per month. Of course, what happened in Belcamp Manor was not a surprise to us, because it is Government policy. That is the reality of it. The Minister can huff and puff all he wants, but he knows that it is Government policy. For many years, Sinn Féin has been raising the issue of investment funds snapping up homes from under the feet of struggling homebuyers. The issue sparked outrage in 2021 when it was revealed that an investment fund had attempted to buy 135 homes at Mullen Park in Maynooth. In response to those events, the housing Minister said we needed to ensure that did not happen and that we would not have first-time buyers competing against large investment funds. He said it was not a situation that anyone could stand over nor indeed that he, as housing Minister, could stand over. This was more huff and more bluff from the Minister for housing because, as we know, it was feigned outrage from a Government which failed to take the necessary action. How do we know that? We warned the Government that the 10% stamp duty it was introducing was simply designed to fail because investment funds would continue to snap up family homes which should be available to first-time purchasers or other purchasers to buy. What has happened since? The Department of Finance told me last week that funds have snapped up 1,200 homes and have paid the 10% stamp duty charge. Some 700 of those homes were in the Minister's city, the capital city of Dublin. The funds have not just got their claws into homes in this city; they are buying up and bulk purchasing in Cork, Carlow, Kildare, Meath, Wicklow, Offaly, Roscommon, Galway, Limerick and Westmeath. That is where they have got their claws in. The Minister then tells us that his measures are working.

As bad as it is that 1,200 properties were bought up and the 10% stamp duty was paid, we know that the funds are buying up far more than that because the Central Statistics Office told us that institutional investors bought up nearly 6,000 homes in 2022. That is the last year for which the office has data. That is 6,000 homes in one year. The Minister stood here last week and said that investor or institutional funds are only buying 1% of the market. If 6,000 homes were sold in this way in 2022, it means that one out of every ten homes is being bought by institutional investors. Some 2,053 of them were actual houses. That is 31% higher than the year before the Government brought in the measure and told us it was going to stop this practice. The Minister stood there and said he could not stand over this practice, but what is the result? The result is that more homes than ever are being bought by vulture funds. More apartments than ever are being bought by vulture funds. More existing homes and more new homes than

ever are being bought by these institutional investors. This shows us clearly that the Government is on the side of these investment funds. That is the reality.

It also raises the question of why stamp duty was paid in respect of just 395 of those purchases. Many of them were purchasing less than ten in a given year and getting around it in that way. The reality is that we on this side of the House know which side we are on. We are very clear that we are on the side of ordinary families. We do not stand over the fact that one in ten purchases is being made by institutional investors. These homes should be available on the market for first-time buyers and other struggling purchasers. When we consider the overall approach to the housing crisis of this Government, it is no wonder we have the scandal whereby 13,500 people, including 4,100 children, are now reported as homeless and in emergency accommodation. It is a stain on the consciousness of this country that any child should be without a place they can call home. This is not the Republic we want to build.

The motion today is about concrete action to end the bulk purchase by investment funds of homes which should be available for families to buy, to accelerate the delivery of social and affordable homes, to reintroduce the ban on no-fault evictions and to change Government policy. That is only likely to happen when we have a new government which has ordinary people's interests at heart.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The issue of vulture funds snapping up family homes across this State is an absolute shame on this Government, just as it is a shame that over 4,000 children were in homeless accommodation over the Christmas period. The fact that this has not been mentioned every single day by Government Ministers in this Dáil since it returned is utterly shameful.

Today, I was interested to hear the Taoiseach say he regrets that vulture funds are snapping up family homes. When one listens to those on the Government benches, one would almost think that they are not in government, and that they do not have the power to make changes to make lives better for ordinary families and workers. I remind the Minister that the Government does have such power. Deputy Varadkar is the Taoiseach and Deputy O'Brien is the Minister for housing. If they are not happy about it, they can do something about it. The only reason the Minister moved on this in 2021 was that there was public pressure and the Opposition was putting pressure on the Government.

Last week, the Minister would have seen the announcement by the Minister, Deputy Harris, on student accommodation. The reality is that the announcement, which was made in DCU, was no more than a re-announcement. The student union was wise to the fact and clearly stated the facts in that regard. I will explain what was not included in that re-announcement. The Minister failed to mention the number of vulture funds which have snapped up purpose-built student accommodation. The accommodation funded by these vulture funds is simply and utterly pricing many students and young people out of access to third level education. We have seen in Galway, Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Carlow that purpose-built accommodation is totally out of the reach of ordinary students. We see that students are being priced out of the market when they look for a place to stay in order to access third level education. The Minister is the Minister for housing, so he needs to do something about it.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have always believed that the very least that people could expect from their government is a roof over their head. To say that the Government is failing in that regard is a profound understatement. At least 13,000 people, including 4,000

children, are without a home. That figure is probably 20,000 when we include all of the shelters in our calculations. The Minister is failing them. What is more is that his Government is beginning to reconcile itself to that fact. At the start of this Dáil term, we had a debate on whether we had a housing emergency. The Government came back and forth, again and again, on whether it was an emergency. It eventually landed and ended up accepting that it was an emergency. The truth is that there has never been an emergency response. Not under the confidence and supply arrangement, and not since the current Minister came into government, has there been an emergency response of the kind that is needed. Every action taken by the Government, even the better ones, was a day late and a dollar short. So much of what the Government is doing is failing completely.

Some of the cases we deal with - I am sure the Minister deals with them too - are absolutely heartbreaking, as are the situations people are facing. These are compounded by the fact that there is very little prospect of things getting any better soon for those people. I will mention some of the people I have spoken to in the past four or five days. There is a man in his 70s who is overstaying just because he is convalescing from a hip operation. He has no idea where he is going to go and he has been on the list for about a year. Another case is of a woman who has still not been assessed for homelessness by a local authority and lives between couch surfing and sleeping in her car with her two children, who are in primary school. Another woman broke down when speaking to me last week because she is now facing homelessness. The father of her two children is already homeless. The only way they can see him, because the homeless accommodation will not facilitate that, is in her house. If she is made homeless, where are they going to see their father? These are the situations that people I have spoken to in the past five or six days are facing. It is the responsibility of the Minister's Government. There needs to be an emergency response. There should have been such a response four or six years ago, or probably more than that. I ask the Minister to bring such a response now by increasing the targets, by increasing the provision for Housing First and by dealing with this matter. He must not continue to allow the vulture funds in through the back door.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Last November, there were 13,514 people in emergency accommodation across this State comprising children, young people, families, single people, people with full-time jobs and even a cohort of our elderly people, all with no home to call their own. It is estimated that the real figure is well above that, given the number of people in hostels and rough sleeping, never mind those who are couch surfing or living in overcrowded conditions with family and friends. The trend is only going one way.

We see these figures increasing from year to year, despite being constantly told that progress is being made. It seems that the Government's definition of progress has a completely different meaning from everyone else's understanding of the word. Since this Government took office, homelessness is up by 61% and child homelessness is up by 74%. Last week we debated the bulk purchasing of new homes by investment funds that are then renting these homes for ridiculous sums of money. Since the Government introduced measures in 2021, some 1,200 homes have been snapped up by these funds and this is also driving rents up. People have no choice but to fork out most of their income on rent. When they cannot pay that kind of money, they end up homeless and around and around it goes. To me, that is a definition of failure, not a definition of progress.

The Minister and his Government need to support this motion. They need to support it for the 4,105 children they have already failed who will be sleeping in emergency accommodation tonight.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The buying up of homes by international vulture funds in Balgriffin is not a new phenomenon. I was in this Chamber in 2021 when a similar-style fund took 121 homes off the market in Bay Meadows in my constituency of Dublin West. That was 121 homes taken out of the reach of any first-time buyer wishing to purchase a family home. Words are important here and I use the word “home” because that is what most normal, hard-working people want to acquire. These funds acquire houses for purely financial greed and have bought over 1,200 in 12 months.

People are looking at housing developments in my constituency, including those in Tyrellstown, Bellingsmore, Hollywoodrath and the Phoenix Park. They are worried about whether they will get a chance to buy one of those, assuming they manage to save the enormous deposit and pay the exorbitant cost. I am out canvassing every single week. There are young people, families and parents. What are they talking about? They are talking about the inability of children and young people to move out and access housing. They did the right thing by getting an education or a trade, going to college, getting a job and saving their money, but they see the chance of buying a home slipping out of their hands every single day.

The Department of Finance revealed that by the end of March 2023, some €21 million in stamp duty had been paid by investment funds bulk-buying 630 homes worth €205 million in less than two years. Department officials admitted the 10% figure is not enough to tackle this problem. Since this Government took office, house prices have risen by 28%, with a first-time buyer in Dublin now needing an income of €127,000 to buy a new home. That is absolutely outrageous. We already know that prices have forced thousands out of the market and that the lack of legislation to protect homes being bought by vulture groups is exacerbating the housing crisis. The Minister knows we need action. He knows the measures he has put in place have failed because his own Department is telling him and because the statistics do not lie. People cannot afford to buy a home in their own city or county.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan - To discuss reducing the rate of VAT to 9% for food items in the hospitality sector.

Deputy Niamh Smyth - To discuss the number of training scheme doctors and interns being assigned to Cavan General Hospital.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the record number of patients treated on trolleys at University Hospital Limerick this January.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh - To discuss recent water supply issues in west Waterford.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss the John O'Meara judgment and the non-availability of widow's or widower's pension to bereaved partners and their families where the parents were unmarried.

Deputy David Stanton - To discuss the need to progress the implementation of flood relief schemes for Midleton, Castlemartyr and Mogeely in east Cork.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss services for children with disabilities in Cavan and Monaghan.

Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Violet-Anne Wynne - To discuss the need to ensure there are sufficient dentists in the scheme to provide dental services to medical card holders in County Galway.

Deputy Martin Browne - To discuss the challenges being faced by restaurants and cafes, leading to an increase in closures.

Deputies Pearse Doherty, Thomas Gould and Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss the bulk purchase of family homes by investment funds and the need for measures to support individual buyers.

The matters raised by Deputies O'Sullivan, Carthy, Stanton and Quinlivan have been selected for discussion.

Housing and Homeless Prevention: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

Debate resumed on the following motion:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— with escalating alarm, the ever-deepening homelessness crisis;

— that in November 2023 13,514 people, including 4,105 children, were in Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage funded emergency accommodation;

— that when all hostels and rough sleepers are included the true level of homelessness is closer to 20,000 people;

— that these figures do not include the tens of thousands of people sofa surfing or living in inadequate and inappropriate accommodation; and

— that the increased activity of investment funds, such as bulk purchasing of properties and increased rents, is driving further numbers of people into homelessness from the private rental sector;

further notes with concern that:

23 January 2024

— the most recent report from the Health Research Board stated that 121 people experiencing homelessness died prematurely in 2021;

— the recommendations of the 2020 Interim Report on Mortality Amongst Single Homeless Population remain mostly unimplemented; and

— homeless charities are raising the alarm that homelessness and deaths of people experiencing homelessness are likely to rise in the time ahead;

condemns the fact that:

— since Fine Gael took office in 2011 homelessness has increased by 254 per cent and child homelessness by 540 per cent;

— since the current Government took office homelessness has increased by 61 per cent and child homelessness by 74 per cent; and

— the Government will not meet its obligations under the Lisbon Declaration to end long-term homelessness by 2030; and

agrees:

— that the Government bring forward measures to effectively ban investment funds from bulk purchasing homes that would otherwise be available to home buyers, local authorities or Approved Housing Bodies; and these measures must include increased stamp duty on such bulk purchases;

— to increase targets and accelerate the delivery of social and affordable housing;

— to the use of emergency planning and procurement powers and new building technologies and vacant homes to deliver an additional stream of social housing specifically for those in emergency accommodation or at risk of homelessness;

— to end homelessness amongst those aged over 55 years and significantly reduce family and child homelessness;

— that the annual target for the delivery of Housing First tenancies must be doubled to 500;

— that any funds saved from reductions in the numbers of people in emergency accommodation should be redirected to homeless prevention to further reduce the numbers of people experiencing homelessness;

— to expand and accelerate the tenant-in-situ schemes for social and affordable housing to reduce the risk of homelessness;

— to increase funding for the provision of domestic violence refuge places; and

— to reintroduce the temporary ban on no fault evictions until there is a meaningful reduction in the numbers of people in emergency accommodation.

- (Deputy Eoin Ó Broin)

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I

move amendment No. 1:

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

“notes that:

— supporting individuals and families facing homelessness is a key Government priority; increasing housing supply across all tenures is critical to addressing homelessness; significant progress is being made in increasing overall supply;

— a record 22,443 homes have been completed in the first nine months of 2023, an 8.9 per cent increase on the same period in 2022 and the highest number of completions recorded for the first three quarters of any year since the Central Statistics Office (CSO) data series began in 2011;

— there are very positive signs that the uplift in new home delivery will be sustained in 2024 and over the coming years, with almost 33,000 (32,801) new homes commenced in 2023; this is the highest number of annual commencements on record, an increase of over 21.5 per cent compared to 2022 (26,957) and is the highest number of annual residential commencements since records began in 2014;

— Budget 2024 provides an allocation of €242 million for homeless services to support increased provision of prevention and tenancy sustainment along with support services, and ensuring pathways out of homelessness as quickly as possible;

— Q3 2023 saw a significant increase (16.3 per cent) in the number of households who were prevented from entering emergency accommodation compared to the same period last year;

— over 1,700 acquisitions were completed in 2023, with the majority of these properties acquired under the Tenant in Situ Scheme; the Government has also approved an increase from 200 to 1,500 for Social Housing Acquisitions for 2024; and there is a strong pipeline for 2024 with over 1,600 proposals already being evaluated for purchase;

— the Cost Rental Tenant In-Situ Scheme (CRTiS) was introduced on 1st April, 2023, for tenants in private rental homes who are not eligible for social housing supports but who are at risk of homelessness; by the end of Q3 2023 47 CRTiS acquisitions have been completed; and

— an additional 1,319 supported tenancies are to be delivered nationally under the Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022-2026 which provides the most vulnerable of our homeless population with a home for life as well as key wrap-around health and social supports; the Housing First targets are based on an analysis of need, this analysis involved all key stakeholders and was supported by the Housing Agency;

further notes that:

— social and affordable housing supply is increasing, under this Government (from July 2020 to the end of September 2023) 30,581 new social homes have been delivered, including 19,590 new builds, 4,216 acquired homes and 6,775 leased

homes;

— the social housing pipeline is strong with over 23,600 homes either onsite or at design and tender stage at the end of Q3 2023;

— since affordable housing schemes were established in 2022 to end of Q3 of 2023, over 3,863 households have been supported, including 482 affordable purchase homes, 2,594 First Home Scheme properties, and some 800 Cost Rental homes;

— in Budget 2024, the total Exchequer funding being made available for the delivery of housing programmes is €4.25 billion; the Capital provision of €2.7 billion will be supplemented by Land Development Agency investment and Housing Finance Agency lending resulting in an overall capital provision of over €5 billion;

— a review and refresh of Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland targets is underway, including for social and affordable housing, with revised targets to be agreed and published in 2024;

— sufficient provision is already made within planning legislation for the delivery of local authority housing through a temporary time-limited planning exemption to enable local authorities to accelerate the delivery of social and affordable (including cost rental) housing on State owned land;

— Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) has been identified by the Government as a key measure to address the different housing needs in Ireland; methods to support the development of MMC in Ireland are set out in Housing for All and include an accelerated social housing pilot programme to deliver over 1,500 MMC units; and

— under the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) Activation Programme, launched in April 2023, local authorities are being supported to use the CPO process to bring properties back into use as social and affordable housing as well as selling these properties on the open market;

notes that, regarding bulk purchasing of homes:

— in 2021, the Government introduced a series of measures designed to prohibit the bulk buying of houses and duplexes, including Section 28 Guidelines which aim to provide an ‘owner-occupier’ guarantee by ensuring that new ‘own-door’ houses and duplex units in housing developments can no longer be bulk-purchased by institutional investors;

— a 10 per cent stamp duty levy was introduced for the cumulative purchase of 10 or more residential houses in a 12-month period, aimed at ensuring a level playing field for traditional family home buyers, including but not limited to first-time buyers, while facilitating vital investment in high density apartments;

— since the introduction of these measures the increased level of stamp duty has applied to less than two per cent of total new dwelling completions; and

— by the end of Q4 2023, planning permissions which had the ‘owner-occupier’ guarantee attached amounted to 39,900 homes with an owner occupier guarantee

since the guidelines were introduced in 2021;

notes that, regarding the provision of domestic violence refuge places:

— the Government has established Cuan, a statutory agency under the remit of the Department of Justice, dedicated to tackling and reducing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV); the Agency will support and oversee the delivery of safe and accessible refuge accommodation, and ensure the delivery of services to victims of DSGBV; and

— a key priority under the National Zero Tolerance strategy is the doubling of the number of refuge places over the lifetime of the strategy to 280 spaces;

notes that, regarding no fault evictions:

— the Government agreed on 7th March, 2023, that the ‘Winter Emergency Period’ under the Residential Tenancies (Deferment of Termination Dates of Certain Tenancies) Act 2022 would come to an end on 31st March, 2023;

— extending the emergency period would be detrimental to the medium and long-term supply of private rental accommodation, local authorities are instead focusing on implementing the additional measures announced last March to increase the supply of social and affordable homes; and

— under Housing for All the Government is committed to increasing supply and protecting renters while trying to keep small landlords in the system; the Government is currently undertaking a review of the Private Rental Sector which will inform the measures which need to be taken to ensure a well-functioning private rental sector in Ireland; and

agrees that continued implementation of Housing for All represents the most appropriate response to deal with the housing challenges, which Ireland is now facing.”.

We are back in the House discussing housing, which is the number one priority of this Government. There are unquestionably issues remaining to be resolved with housing, but real progress is also unquestionably being made on supply and delivery. Some Members will not want to acknowledge that for political reasons and that is fine. Sinn Féin will come in week after week and bring forward motions. We are a year on from its housing spokesperson promising a Sinn Féin housing plan. That has yet to be produced.

I have listened to a number of Sinn Féin Deputies talk about homeownership. I will touch on a few matters around homeownership and address other issues that have been raised here. This Government, and I as Minister, support homeownership 100%. Fortunately, every week we are seeing about 600 first-time buyers buying their homes across the country. Many of those first-time buyers are using the supports this Government has brought forward, including over 42,500 households availing of the help-to-buy grant, which is €30,000 of their own tax that they have earned back in their pocket. Listening to Deputy Ó Broin and his colleagues, I wonder what is wrong with individuals getting a rebate of the tax they have worked hard for to use towards the deposit to be able to buy a home. Sinn Féin has repeatedly said, though there is some contradiction on its position on this, that it would abolish the €30,000 help-to-buy grant that is helping many individuals and families to buy new homes that are being built across the country.

There has been a contradiction between the position of the party's housing spokesperson, who said he would abolish it straight away if - God forbid - he was in government, and that of his party leader, who is trying to assure people there will be no cliff edge in this regard.

The first home scheme is another measure the Government has brought forward to bridge that affordability gap, which is a real gap that is there for many people across the country. As of 15 January, some 7,595 individuals have registered for that and there have been over 3,300 approvals. That is the State stepping in to help people to bridge the gap between the finance they have, including the deposit. Many of them will be using the deposit through the help-to-buy grant, which again is tax back that they have earned in their pocket, and then accessing the first home scheme to be able to buy the homes. I have met individuals and families across the country who have been able to buy homes through that scheme. Why would a party decide to abolish a scheme that is working? It is working for people and supporting homeownership. Some parties talk about homeownership and say that they apparently support it, but then in the policy approaches they bring forward, the motions they bring forward and their public utterances, they talk about abolishing these supports. Maybe in the summation of the Sinn Féin motion, its housing spokesperson will for the first time say what Sinn Féin would replace those supports for people with.

Moving to the delivery of affordable homes through our local authorities and the Land Development Agency, last year, for the first time in a generation, we saw affordable homes being delivered through local authorities and the agency. This Land Development Agency will invest about €1 billion this year in social and affordable housing right across the country. By the way, the main Opposition party is on record as saying it will abolish the agency. It says it would get rid of the agency; it does not want an agency that develops State land and delivers homes for people. Again, we have not seen what the alternative is. The Land Development Agency is developing cost-rental homes at scale and will deliver more cost-rental homes this year for our people. We do not see what would replace that.

On supply and delivery, the housing completion figures for 2023 will be published by the CSO on Thursday. For the second year of Housing for All, we will see that its targets have been exceeded and exceeded substantially. We need to deliver more social homes. In 2022 we delivered more social homes than we have in 50 years. Yes, we are playing catch-up. We have ten years of very significant undersupply in public homes, but as I speak there are over 24,000 social homes at various stages of construction across this country because of the €5 billion-plus we are investing in housing this year on behalf of our people under a published, detailed, Housing for All plan. It is a plan incomparable with that of any other party. There is a complete absence of a plan from the main Opposition party. What would it replace the LDA with? What would it replace the help-to-buy grant with? What would it replace the first home scheme with?

With vacancy, we see that over 6,000 applications have been made to help individuals and families to defray the cost of bringing vacant homes back into use, which I take it we all want to do.

7 o'clock

Again, Sinn Féin's alternative budget, published a month after the budget, made no provision whatsoever for vacancy grants and the continuation of same. This leads me to believe that Sinn Féin will abolish those grants if it is ever in government. These are schemes that are working for people. What we have to continue to do is increase the supply of public and private

homes across the board, stabilise the private rental market and continue with the delivery of cost-rental homes.

Unquestionably, the number one challenge remains homelessness and ensuring that those who do not have homes can have permanent homes for themselves and their families. Since 2020, 21,212 single adults and families have either been prevented from entering into, or have exited from, homelessness and into permanent homes. About 14,000 HAP tenancies have been transferred out of the HAP scheme and into permanent social homes. That is what we have to continue doing.

On bulk purchasing, I changed the planning regime in 2021. I brought forward legislation that amended our planning laws to ensure there was a ban on bulk purchases of family homes, including houses and duplexes. Since May 2021, 42,000 planning permits have been granted for homes with that absolute condition attached. There is a ban on the bulk sale of those homes and the Deputies opposite know that. The issues that we are dealing with are legacy issues related to planning permission granted before that date. The legal advice was very clear on that and maybe some Deputies opposite would accept that one cannot change planning permission that was granted before the date of the law that came forward. The reality is that out of approximately 125,000 property transactions since that legislative change, less than 1% of homes have been the subject of bulk purchase in that period. That said, it is still something that I do not want to see.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not true.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It has been confirmed to the main Opposition spokesperson as well, that the Government will review the-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order, the Minister has named me here in the debate but that is not true and he knows it is not true.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy can come back in-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is only where 10% stamp duty was applied. It was actually 10% that were purchased by funds.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: We will have the Minister without interruption.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: If I may-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Sinn Féin has ample speaking time on its own motion.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: If I may continue-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: The party will have ample opportunity.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister cannot peddle untruths here. In fairness, he cannot make up his own facts and name me, as if I was giving that information. Correct the record.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: What Deputy Doherty never-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Please correct the record.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Excuse me. What Deputy Doherty will never do here this evening, because it does not suit the Sinn Féin narrative, is mention the changes that have been made in planning-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Minister correct the record?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Changes that have actually had that effect of ensuring there is no more bulk purchasing. There is a legacy issue with a very small percentage-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister is avoiding the issue. Will he correct the record?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The CSO data is there.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Thank you, Deputies.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister cannot spout lies in the Chamber.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----of homes.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ten per cent is not small; it is 6,000 units

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: As was confirmed by me last week when we debated this matter, and as stated by the Taoiseach, the 10% stamp duty rate is being reviewed. Let us not take this out of context or catastrophise this issue. I am well aware of those 45 homes in Belcamp and am aware of other instances but what we are looking at across the board is progress. Again, none of the Deputies in the main Opposition parties will even recognise the progress that is being made in housing delivery, in both social and affordable homes and in cost-rental homes that we legislated for and have delivered for the first time. In Sinn Féin's alternative budget, although there is an absence of a plan for housing, what it says it will invest in housing is over €1 billion less than the Government is investing right now.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is completely untrue.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is not true, it is €1.7 billion more.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Ó Broin can huff and puff over there but a year ago, in his interview with Mr. Hugh O'Connell in the *Irish Independent*, he stated very clearly that he was working hard on a Sinn Féin alternative housing plan, he would have it done soon and would publish it but we are still waiting for that a year later. In the absence of that plan, all we see, week on week, is Sinn Féin coming forward with half-page or one-and-a-half-page motions that try to jump on one bandwagon or another.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is also not true.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: What we are actually doing is focusing on delivering progress for our people.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: What the Minister is delivering is rising homelessness-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The number one priority within that-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: -----month on month on month. He is delivering rising homelessness-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are seeing first-time buyers up.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: -----for adults, children-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are seeing social housing waiting lists down.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: -----families, single people; rising levels of homeless.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It might disappoint Deputy Ó Broin that this Thursday we will again see a Government that has exceeded its housing targets.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is his legacy and his record.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There is a complete absence of any alternative from Sinn Féin, particularly in relation to first-time buyers. Deputy Ó Broin should go and tell the 42,500 households that have claimed the help-to-buy grant that they do not deserve it and that anyone applying for it does not deserve it. He should also tell it to the nearly 7,500 households who have registered and been approved for the first home scheme which will enable them to buy their own home. These are people who are stuck in a rental trap who are now able to own a home. That is what is happening with this Government and with Housing For All.

Deputy David Stanton: There are nearly 14,000 in homelessness.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: It would be better for the conduct of the debate in general if Members could make their contributions without interruption.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We were very restrained today.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Deputies will have ample opportunity to make their contributions.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Yes, more restrained than they are usually.

Deputy Chris Andrews: Housing remains the number one issue for ordinary people. Prospective home buyers are being picked off by the vulture funds, and this Government's failures in housing have only increased the concerns of local communities. People who have grown up in their community want the opportunity to continue to live in there, near their support structures but without affordable housing, communities will continue to be pulled apart. The Irish Glass Bottle site gave hope to so many in Ringsend and Irishtown. It gave them the hope that they would finally be able to buy affordable homes in their community, as promised. However, with each passing month, concerns about affordability grow. The Irish Glass Bottle site will have 950 homes on it, a mix of social and affordable homes. However, it is hard to see how the so-called affordable homes on the site will actually be affordable. The well-informed speculation is that the homes on the site will come in at between €600,000 and €700,000 each. Even with the Government subvention, that will not be affordable for ordinary families. The only people that will be able to afford the homes on the site are vulture funds and the extremely wealthy. I ask the Minister to give an assurance to the community that vulture funds will not be allowed to buy up all of the homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site.

The Government needs to put the construction of the new Dodder bridge on hold until these apartments are made affordable. If that is what it takes to make them affordable then it must be done. There is still no affordable housing scheme in place. The community has waited far too long for these new homes. The residents of Seán Moore Road are enduring construction noise from 7 a.m. each day, and the construction works are so extensive that they are concerned for the structure of their own homes. I ask the Minister to meet the developer to get answers for the local community.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy's party leader knows the developer.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I also ask him to meet with the residents who live beside the Irish Glass Bottle site.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have met the residents and am happy to meet them again.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister said that he believes real progress is being made. I genuinely do not know how he said that with a straight face. Behind all of his policy failings - sky-high rents, unaffordable homes, rampant vulture funds and 13,500 homeless people, 4,000 of whom are children - are real people. Families are having their lives destroyed. Sometimes I think that if the Minister knew how bad the situation was, he might actually change tack but maybe I am wrong. In his own constituency, which is also mine, I have two offices and I run very busy clinics. I had a look at my diary and took a sample from one day. My first appointment was with a lovely woman who is waiting on the tenant in situ scheme to decide whether it will purchase her home. She has to be out by April and is absolutely frantic because she does not want to take her kids out of their school and so on. Next, a mother and father who have two kids. The mould in their apartment is exacerbating their asthma. The impact on their health, both mental and physical, is indescribable but they are stuck there because there is nowhere else for them to go. Next up was a man in his 50s. Relationship breakdown has left him homeless. He is couch surfing but he tells me that he is very close to giving up hope. Imagine the indignity of having to do that in one's 50s. Next was a woman in her 60s who has been on the housing list for 13 years. She is sleeping on a relative's floor. I cannot describe to the Minister the impact of this on her physical and mental health. Next, a father and daughter who are both homeless and desperate to rent somewhere close together. They are living in different parts of the city, one sleeping on a floor and the other on a couch. Finally on that day, a woman with three kids in a domestic abuse shelter which she is due to leave at the end of this month. She cannot go back to her family home for obvious reasons and is sick with worry at the thought of joining the 13,500 people in emergency accommodation. Her situation is already bad enough. These people should be the Government's priority, not the vulture funds but real people who need help now.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The fact is that the housing situation continues to get worse under the Government's watch. The fact is that rents are at an all-time high and rising. The Government has missed its social and affordable housing targets for three years in a row. It is a fact that in County Laois new rents have increased by 11.4% in 12 months. In fact, it is almost impossible to enter the private rental market. Sky-high rents are placing a massive financial and mental burden on low-paid workers. There is not one single home to rent in the Portlaoise-Abbeyleix municipal district under the HAP limits. At present, there are no cost-rental projects in Laois and no sign of a scheme being developed at this point. We have no affordable-to-buy housing units. Some 30 homes are being planned but these are very much in the long term. Portarlinton, Mountmellick, Graiguecullen, Mountrath and Portlaoise all need affordable housing.

The Government's refusal to intervene to prevent investment funds from pushing up house prices and snapping up family homes from under the noses of workers and families is compounding the crisis. Of the more than 13,500 people in emergency accommodation, and there are hundreds and probably thousands of other homeless people who are not in such accommodation, more than 4,000 are children. Since Fine Gael took office in 2011, homelessness has increased by 254% and child homelessness by 540%. We need to increase house targets, accelerate the delivery of social and affordable housing to buy, and expand and give priority to the tenant *in situ* scheme. I again appeal to the Government to reintroduce the temporary no-fault ban on evictions until there is a meaningful reduction in the number of people in emergency accommodation. These measures are sensible and achievable. We can do this, as can the Government. We can introduce these measures to house people and stop the tide of people going into homeless accommodation.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The most recent homeless figures in November were startling. They showed 13,514 people in homelessness. Of those, 4,105 were children. Of course, these figures mask the real nature of homelessness in the State because they do not consider those in hostels and rough sleepers. When those people are added, there are probably more than 20,000 who are homeless. In Limerick, 361 adults are availing of the department of emergency accommodation. Across the mid-west, 91 families with 149 dependent children are availing of such accommodation. These are startling figures.

Homelessness is something the Government has failed to prevent. It can be said that its failed housing policies have exacerbated this crisis. Since it took office, homelessness has increased by 61% and child homelessness by 74%. It is shameful that the Government has allowed things to get so bad for our citizens. Under its stewardship, there are record house prices, record rent increases and a record level of homelessness. In Limerick city, property prices are beyond the reach of many working families. We have seen a year-on-year increase of almost 10% in property prices with the average house now costing approximately €300,000, which is unaffordable for most working families. For those who try to rent in Limerick, there was a 21% increase in rents in quarter 3 of 2023, with the average two-bedroom property costing €1,400 per month. With these costs, is it any wonder more and more people have to seek emergency accommodation?

There are things that can be done to stem the tide of homelessness. These are things that should have been done long before now. The Government could increase and deliver Housing First tenancy targets, reintroduce the temporary ban on no-fault evictions, the lifting of which has catastrophically increased homelessness numbers, and it could expand and increase the tenant *in situ* scheme, which, to be fair, is a good scheme.

As the Minister of State knows, the weather in Limerick is pretty bad, as it is throughout the country. Homelessness services told me today that they are turning away people from emergency accommodation because there is nowhere for them to sleep. They are doing that every single day. Something needs to be done. There needs to be an intervention specifically on that issue.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The homeless figures released before Christmas showed a shocking increase in both adult and child homelessness. They showed that there is no respite in the growing number of people becoming homeless. The reality is these figures do not reflect the true number of those who are in homelessness. These figures do not tell us how many people are couch surfing or how many rough sleepers there are. The crisis in the rental sector has led to a growing number of people being made homeless or who are in danger of becoming homeless.

The exit of landlords from the rental sector and evictions from private rental accommodation increased substantially since the no-fault eviction ban ended last year.

I regularly meet people in my constituency office who have been served with eviction notices and struggle to find alternative accommodation. The Government is not delivering social housing on a scale that will alleviate the housing and homelessness crisis. There is a clear contradiction between what members of the Government say in the House and the reality on the ground. The Government's housing policies have failed and are failing. It has suggested that the bulk-buying of properties by investment funds represents a small percentage of the housing being built but a vulture fund has bought up to 125 apartments in Hampton Wood, Ballymun, while another has acquired 435 apartments at Royal Canal Park, Ashtown. These are not insignificant numbers. These bulk purchases are particularly noticeable because they are happening in areas of Dublin where additional housing is urgently needed and people are at greater risk of becoming homeless.

The Government is over-reliant on the private sector to provide housing and rental properties, and has spent huge sums on private rent subsidies and HAP, yet homeless figures keep rising to record levels. This will not change while the Government continues to pursue policies and strategies that have failed in the past and are failing now.

Deputy Ged Nash: I sincerely thank Deputy Ó Broin and Sinn Féin for bringing the motion before the House. It is unfortunate and, frankly, troubling that we have to discuss housing and homelessness so often in the Chamber but, as we are all aware, this is the sad reality. This is the issue of our time. It is very rare that you can point to a single issue and say that is what is uniquely holding our country back. However, as the President put it a couple of years ago, the disaster that is housing in Ireland is the single biggest barrier to making real progress in this country. The lack of affordable housing is preventing us from having enough teachers to fill our schools, nurses to staff our hospitals, and carers and educators for our childcare services. It is the principal reason and impetus behind our kids fleeing to Australia and Canada, or wherever else, in search of greener pastures. Young people who grew up here, were educated here, and would love under better circumstances to stay, contribute and make a life for themselves here, fairly ask why they would do so. What is here for them?

Thanks to the housing issue, the concept and principle of the social contract have been shattered and irredeemably broken. When I speak to young people, I am always struck by the hopelessness they feel regarding their prospects of ever owning a home. So many of them have already effectively given up. They are fatalistic about this and I can understand why. Even those with well-paying jobs who scrimp and save as much as they can are being priced out of the market. In some cases I have encountered in recent times, they are being priced out of the market because they are bidding against a local authority. At best, they are miles away from their family, friends and places of work, if they can afford a house that is quite distant from their family network in the first instance.

Secure housing is the bedrock of any sort of decent life. We need to reconcile the fact that more and more people are renting. How can we claim that any young person renting in Ireland has secure housing when his or her landlord can decide to sell and give him or her the boot at the drop of a hat? We simply do not have a secure, social democratic, European-style renting system. It used to be that someone would move out of the family home, would maybe rent for a couple of years, save up for a deposit, and then buy a place of his or her own. That was the expectation. It was a realistic expectation for most of our history of statehood. It was a modest

but realistic ambition. Even that is now an unrealistic prospect for the majority of people. If they are not priced out of the rental market entirely, they are certainly paying such extortionate rent that saving for a deposit is virtually impossible. It is not just young people, as the Minister of State well knows. People well into their 30s, 40s and 50s are stuck in a rental trap with little prospect of ever having the security of a home of their own. As I said, the social contract is broken. The threads that hold that fabric together are being pulled away.

There is then the hidden homeless or those forced into couch surfing or living with their parents. How are these people meant to have any sort of decent and dignified life, if they have not got the security of a place they can truly call their own and are infantilised by living at home with their parents? Their development is arrested. Their sense of progress, their dignity and their own self-respect is hammered. Homelessness is a product of this insecure system. It stems not just from a lack of supply of housing but a lack of affordable housing and a lack of secure housing.

Most damning of all, however, is a figure contained in this motion that we are all too familiar with, which is the 74% increase in the number of children living in homeless accommodation since this Government took office. That is the legacy of this Government. How could anybody in their right mind claim that Housing For All, the only show in town, is a success when we have so many children living in homeless accommodation? It is a shame of this Government. The homeless figures for December will be released on Friday and I dread to see the number of children who were in homeless accommodation last month. How many of them spent Christmas without a home? How many kids are doing homework on the floor of a homeless hub or a hotel in Dublin, Drogheda or Dundalk and right across the country? That figure of 74% represents an utter failure in the State's duty towards our children. This Government has failed on the basics. This motion does not ask for any more than the State to address the basics. It asks, for example, that we bring forward measures that would effectively ban investment funds from bulk purchasing homes. This is a reasonable ask and a reasonable request. Of course the funds themselves are behaving virtually unobstructed certainly from a tax point of view. We know - we have debated it here last week and *ad nauseam* over the last three years - that the 10% stamp duty surcharge was never going to have an impact and was never going to dissuade funds with deep pockets from engaging in the kind of activity they do.

The motion also asks that the Government amends its housing targets to reflect the real housing needs. We in the Labour Party have been sneered at for calling for an increase in the targets and for 50,000 houses a year for the next decade. That is not a figure that we just plucked out of the air. It is based on an unpublished report from the Government's own Housing Commission in 2022, which estimates that we require new builds of 40,000 to 60,000 a year. The Taoiseach has conceded that the housing targets need to and will be revised but he has intimated a 5,000 increase on the yearly target. This is insufficient and is a paltry increase given the scale we need. Less than two weeks ago the Economic and Social Research Institute concurred that targets need to be significantly increased by far more than the Government is now proposing, while the Irish Institutional Property organisation, hardly a bunch of unreconstructed lefties, estimates that the target needs to be closer to 60,000. What is more, the Construction Industry Federation has said that we can achieve that number.

I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, that none of us takes any pleasure in watching the housing disaster unfold. That would be wrong, unseemly and unbecoming of us all. We all care about our housing policy. We all care about a housing strategy and we all care about the situation in which too many people in this country find themselves. We do not

take any pleasure from this disaster unfolding: the month-on-month increase in homelessness, working people locked out of the housing market and our young people leaving the country in such numbers. They used to leave the country not that long ago in search of work. The problem then was an absence of work. We fixed that; we fixed the unemployment problem. We have created the conditions to create the kinds of jobs we have currently but the problem now is housing. The resources are there but the problem is that a realistic, sustainable strategy and policy simply are not.

The Opposition is trying to help. Let us look beyond the Punch and Judy stuff. We are trying to help and we are trying to be constructive. Nobody takes any pleasure whatsoever in the number of people who are homeless, the number of people who are on housing waiting lists, and the number of people who are waiting to buy their own affordable homes. We are trying to be constructive. Every other week there is an Opposition motion or an Opposition Bill seeking to be constructive to work with the Government on improving the disastrous housing situation. For our part, the Labour Party brought forward several motions and Bills in recent times. There was a Seanad motion to tackle vacancy and dereliction. There was a Dáil motion setting out how the Government could have used last year's winter eviction ban to ease the pressures of the housing sector on families. There was the Housing (Homeless Families) Bill to ensure that children are prioritised in emergency accommodation settings. I could go on. At every turn we have been met with resistance, in some cases with hostility, and outright refusal mostly.

I do not doubt that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, are serious in their commitment to solving the housing disaster, but they have tunnel vision on a failed housing policy. It is no shame to change tack and to change direction. It would be to the Minister's and Minister of State's credit and their Government's credit if they did. Homelessness continues to rise. Adults continue to be forced to move back in with their parents - if they were ever able to move out in the first place. Our young people continue to leave this country in considerable numbers principally because of housing.

We in the Labour Party also take seriously the solving of this housing crisis. I know that colleagues in other Opposition parties do so as well and there is no shame in changing course and taking on some of the measures that have come from the Opposition. We want to help and we want to be constructive but the Government has thus far refused to allow that to happen. This is a good and sensible motion containing measures that would, in our view, have a real and positive impact on the housing situation. I urge the Minister of State to take these measures on board.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ó Broin for putting forward this very important motion. It is not an unrealistic expectation that the Minister would engage more seriously when these motions are put forward. I do not mean the Minister of State currently present in the Chamber: I mean the senior Minister who has left. In a situation of record homelessness that is higher than ever seen before in the history of the State I would expect the senior Minister to come in and acknowledge that, acknowledge the absolute trauma this causes for people, and then tell us what specific actions he will take to reduce the highest ever number of people in homelessness and in emergency accommodation. I do not expect him to be able to work miracles overnight but I do expect him to tell us what specific measures he is taking now to get those numbers down so that month after month we are not getting record levels of homelessness. People would be realistic about the time it would take to get the numbers down. Instead, each time a motion like this is proposed the senior Minister spends most of his time attacking the Opposition parties and blaming them for the housing disaster that we have, while not giving

us a serious analysis and commentary on what he will do to tackle this issue. That is not too much to expect. That is what most people in this country expect from our Cabinet Members. Of course the senior Minister is not here in the Chamber and he is not hearing these comments. The junior Minister of State is here.

I will talk about what needs to be done and what can be done to get us out of this terrible housing disaster. For those without a home it is a disaster. Homelessness is at record levels with 13,514 people in emergency homeless accommodation in November. This includes 9,409 adults, 193 pensioners and 4,105 children. Homelessness has been rising for 22 out of the past 23 months. This does not include - as others have said - hidden homelessness. It does not include those who are sleeping in cars, in doorways and in tents. It does not include the 118 people who are sleeping rough in Dublin this winter. It does not include the more than 600 international protection applicants who have been sleeping rough recently during freezing winter conditions and storms. The number of children in homelessness has increased by 55% since the Government has taken office and the number of adults in homelessness has increased by 56%.

This Government has missed all of its targets for delivery of social and affordable homes in 2022 and in every year since being in office. Housing For All in 2022 promised 9,000 social homes and 4,100 affordable homes. Only 7,433 social homes were delivered. Only 323 affordable purchase and only 684 cost-rental homes were actually delivered in 2022. We have the figures for the first three quarters of 2023 with 9,100 social homes promised and 5,500 affordable homes promised. In the first nine months only 2,642 social homes, 159 affordable purchase homes and 56 cost-rental homes were actually delivered. At the same time, since the Government took office, more than €1 billion allocated for housing to build homes that we desperately need was left unspent, allocated elsewhere or returned to the Exchequer. Last year alone, €220 million allocated to build local authority social housing was allocated elsewhere and €70 million allocated for affordable housing was allocated elsewhere. At the same time, more than 500,000 adults are stuck living in their childhood bedrooms. Those aged between 25 and 29 in Ireland are 15 times more likely to be living at home than the same age cohort in Denmark. Home ownership is at its lowest level in more than 50 years. If we look at us compared with 1991, when Ireland had one of the highest levels of homeownership rates in the European Union at almost 80%, and fast-forward 30 years, we see home ownership levels fell to 66% in 2022 and they continue to fall.

What needs to be done? It is quite simple and straightforward. I am not saying it is easy or does not require a lot of work, because it does, but it can be done. What the Government, the State and local authorities should be doing now is using compulsory purchase orders to buy land so we can build affordable and social housing at the scale that is needed. They should have a master plan for the land as a strategic development zone, plan the amenities and community infrastructure, and then get on with starting to build the thousands of affordable and social homes to rent and buy that we need rather than the Government missing its targets every year, hoping the delivery mechanisms will come through, which they never do, and get on with doing this. This was recommended 50 years ago when the Kenny report was published.

Along with this, the Government needs to invest in upgrading infrastructure, including water, wastewater and public transport, to service the CPO lands. It needs to sort out capacity constraints. For example, it should adopt the proposals of the Law Reform Commission on how to speed up the CPO process. This would help. We need to get more people into construction apprenticeships. A very good start for this would be to pay them at least the minimum wage. This would be a good start if the Government were to take this seriously. It should ensure in

terms of State construction contracts that at least 10% of the workforce would be apprentices. This is done in other countries where they take this seriously, unlike the Government. It should take measures to get more women involved in construction apprenticeships. In the UK the number of women in apprenticeships was tripled because it took proactive measures to do so. In some countries half the workforce in some areas of construction is made up of women. Our labour participation rates are off the charts compared with some other European countries with regard to how poor they are in terms of women.

Where gaps in construction cannot be filled we should of course expand the critical skills list. This includes planners. They are not on the critical skills list even though we have a crisis. An Bord Pleanála is hiring more planners, which is welcome, but it has taken planners out of local authorities where there are also needed. We are not training enough each year. There need to be more trained planners coming out of the education system. Pending this we should have planners on the critical skills list, as they were previously, when planners in countries with similar planning systems, such as New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, were able to come and fill empty posts. This needs to be done. The cumbersome first stage approval process should be abolished. Early stage finance for affordable housing projects should be provided to help get them off the ground. This is a critical barrier that needs to be tackled.

This is not a radical plan that I am advancing. It is simply what needs to be done. It is simply what was done before in this country when we had very few resources. Ireland in the 1950s was not some sort of economic powerhouse but this is exactly what was done. Look at what Dublin Corporation did in terms of putting in a large amount of social and affordable purchase housing in my constituency on the northside of Dublin. It completed the northern sewage system to create the wastewater infrastructure to allow for that housing. In 1954, it used CPO to acquire 602 acres. This is how we got a large number of social and affordable purchase homes built and provided in areas such as Kilmore, Bonnybrook, Edenmore and Coolock. Along with this it reserved sites for shopping centres such as Edenmore Shopping Centre and Northside Shopping Centre. With hindsight we can absolutely say the densities were far too low and it could have done much better with far more housing, but it was successful delivery of housing through the use of CPO and getting on with it.

In 1963 in my constituency,, the corporation put in a CPO for 329 acres in the Swan's Nest area of Kilbarrack. It was very successful in delivering much-needed homes. In fact, it was quite a controversial CPO because it involved land owned by private developers with existing planning permission. It still went ahead and did it because it was needed. It completed homes that went on to provide the basis for people having very successful lives and getting involved in their communities and building their families.

How could this be paid for? Of course there is no shortage of funding from the European Investment Bank. There are a range of European Union funding streams for housing that the Government is failing to maximise, such as InvestEU. Its social window could be used to fund social and affordable housing. The European Social Fund Plus can be used to fund social housing in areas with a high risk of homelessness. This is very relevant here. The European Regional Development Fund can be used for investment in social housing. Horizon Europe can support investment in social housing through research and innovation projects aimed at improving housing conditions. There is no shortage of things the Government could be doing now to get more housing, which we need built and delivered.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion on housing. I do

not think we need to pore over the litany of failures of the Government. The facts and reality speak for themselves in terms of the catastrophic situation we are now facing with the human misery the housing and home crisis is inflicting. There are record numbers of people in emergency accommodation. People are absolutely crucified with rents that are off the Richter scale and unaffordable. House prices are at shocking, unaffordable and record levels. So many of our young people are now leaving the country as soon as they get through college or do their apprenticeship. They are leaving the country in their tens of thousands because they cannot afford to live here. This is the simple reason.

Recently I was in London. I worked in London in the late 1980s when there were an awful lot of Irish people there. In recent years I did not see as many young Irish people in London. I did not notice them. In the past year or two this has dramatically changed. I could not believe how many young Irish people I met in London. All of them were saying the same thing, which was that they are over there - and London is expensive - because they cannot find anywhere affordable to live in Dublin. They are leaving for England, Australia and the Middle East because they cannot afford to live here. They are the very people in many cases that we need to fill the skills shortages we have, build the houses we desperately need, work in our hospitals, teach in our schools and colleges, drive the buses and work in all of the other areas where we are suffering chronic skills shortages. The people are leaving because we cannot put an affordable roof over their heads. The Government has failed to do so. We could do it but the Government has failed to do so.

The vulture funds issue, which has been focused on recently, is a substantial part of the reason for all of this. The decision to unload all of NAMA's property assets into the hands of investment funds, give them massive tax breaks and give them control of the land bank and all the new development has been a disaster. It has not been a disaster for them as they have had extraordinary profits. The consequence is that they drip-feed the housing development that is made available. When it is made available, it is at record house prices that are unaffordable for ordinary working people and at extraordinary rents. In my area the average house price is now €610,000. The average rent per month is €2,500. This means people need €30,000 in after-tax income to pay the rent. This is 100% of the after-tax income of the average worker. People might think there are rich people out my way, and there are some, but I can tell you the vast majority of people are ordinary working people and they cannot afford it. They are effectively being socially cleansed out of their own community because they cannot pay those rents or afford those house prices. They are in jobs, have kids and are trying to struggle their way through and contribute to our society, yet they end up in flipping homeless accommodation. It is shocking.

Those vulture funds should be banned. No ifs, no buts. They have contributed nothing. Get them out. Give them six months to sell their properties to the State or they will be taken off them. End all of these tax breaks and take those properties off them.

There is something practical I want the Government to do, although the Minister of State will not agree with much of what I am about to say. Most of what the funds are delivering through their increased construction are two-bedroom and one-bedroom units, as they can make more money from them in apartment developments. This means we are seeing a significant uptick in family homelessness. Nothing is being delivered for someone who has several kids and needs three or four bedrooms. This needs to be addressed. I guarantee people that, if they look at the trajectory of homelessness, they will see more families there. While there is some increased delivery of one-bedroom and two-bedroom units – it is not enough, by the way – there are none of the three-bedroom and four-bedroom units we need for families.

We have submitted an amendment to the Planning and Development Bill. Currently, the State gets 10% or 20% of every new development for social housing. It is 20% if the development was started under the new regime that was introduced a while ago and 10% if the development started before then. The new Bill will dilute this obligation. It used to be the case that someone had to give a minimum of 20%, but the Bill will change that to a maximum of 20%. Why is that? This change needs to be addressed. The rate should be 50% or 60%. That is not radical or off the charts. It is what is done in places like Vienna. To put it sharply, what is the point in new developments where 80% of the units being delivered are unaffordable? That is the reality. If only 20% are social and affordable in the current market conditions, then 80% of those developments are unaffordable for working people. This was confirmed today by the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, but everyone could see it anyway from just looking at the prices. That level is pointless. Only the investment funds can afford those units. They are buying them because no one else can, or people are paying ridiculous prices and we are creating the potential for the sort of crash we had before, with people taking out mortgages they cannot afford. We need the State to ensure an obligation that at least 50% - I would say 60% - of all developments be social and affordable housing. This obligation should be inserted in the Planning and Development Bill.

It cannot be set up overnight but we need a State construction company. One of the major blocks to the fast delivery of social and affordable housing is procurement, with regulations forced on us by the EU. We should do something about that as well. Consider the delays in the delivery of social and affordable projects. When the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, IGEES, was searching for the real problem with the delivery of housing supply, it stated that procurement was a major issue. Another issue it identified was what it said looked like land hoarding and speculation. It did not point to problems with planning permissions, as there are loads of planning permissions. We need to short-circuit the speculation and procurement issues. A State construction company could do so. I do not care if it breaks state aid rules. Europe is breaking all of its own state aid rules anyway. We should say that, to deliver the social and affordable housing we need for an emergency, we should not have to jump through all those hoops and the State should build up its own construction capacity as fast as possible. In the short term, we need a quicker process to enlist contractors and they should be required to deliver at least 50% social and affordable housing.

We immediately need to reinstate the no-fault eviction ban. The Government goes on about how the ban did not work, but the homelessness and housing situations have grown much worse since the Government removed it. Some of us, including Deputy Cian O'Callaghan and me, have pointed out time and again that, if someone elsewhere in Europe pays his or her rent and does nothing wrong, he or she cannot get evicted. Why would it be any different here? Why should someone who pays his or her rent, is a good tenant and does nothing wrong have to live in a permanent state of insecurity? I have heard the Government speaking about the need to have a better and more professional rental sector and blah, blah, blah, but it wants to leave tenants in a permanent state of insecurity because it refuses to give them security of tenure, which is a basic thing the people of this country have been fighting for for hundreds of years. It was one of the main motivating factors in the resistance to colonialism in this country, for God's sake. We need to introduce security of tenure.

There should be use it or lose it provisions where developers are sitting on planning permissions or zoned residential building land. That sort of activity is rampant, so use it or lose it provisions need to be introduced through the Planning and Development Bill to stamp it out. If

developers speculate or hoard or bank land, they should forfeit it to the State for the provision of the social and affordable housing that we need.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There are 9,409 adults currently homeless in the State, and 4,105 children are accessing emergency accommodation. That is equivalent to the full population of the town of Midleton in Cork. It is a significant number of Irish citizens who are currently in a state of homelessness. There is the equivalent of 117 classrooms of children homeless at the moment. It is an incredible situation. There are 60,000 people on local authority waiting lists in the State. Eurostat has found that there has been a 100% increase in rents since Fine Gael was elected to government in 2011. House prices are out of reach for all but the wealthiest in society. It was reported today that the combined earnings of a nurse and a garda would not buy a three-bedroom semi-detached house in the greater Dublin area. If someone was one of two important public servants in this country and carrying out critical roles in the delivery of health or security, he or she could not live within the greater Dublin area. That does not just mean County Dublin but also Louth, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow. That person is condemned to commuter hell just to provide his or her services. This cancer of a housing crisis that has been allowed to exist for the past ten years is affecting every element of society and of the delivery of Government services.

The Government's targets are half what they need to be. According to the ESRI, we need to be building 60,000 homes annually. Regarding the social housing targets, the first nine months of last year saw 2,642 new social homes built. The target was 9,100 for the whole year. Two thousand affordable homes were delivered in the first three quarters of last year, far fewer than the 5,500 targeted. Fine Gael has been in government for 13 years: Mr. Phil Hogan, Deputy Alan Kelly of the Labour Party, Deputy Simon Coveney, Mr. Eoghan Murphy and now Deputy Darragh O'Brien from Fianna Fáil. Every year, this crisis has steadily worsened.

We need to focus on a number of issues, the first of which is the number of deaths among homeless people. In recent years, we in Aontú have been to the fore in highlighting the number of people dying in homelessness every year. We have found out that, in the past five years, more than 400 Irish citizens have passed away in homelessness. That is an incredible record, yet it is just the number that have died in the capital city. No other local authority collects that detail at all. That figure, therefore, is a multiple of 400 in its entirety for the State regarding those who are dying in homelessness currently. Those figures have got steadily worse since 2018. In that year, 47 deaths were recorded, while there were 49 in 2019, 76 in 2020 and 115 in 2021. It is heartbreaking to see this happening because if we look at the age profile of those who died, about two thirds of the people currently dying in homelessness in the State are younger than I am. These are lives that have been stolen from people who had enormous potential and should have had a significant proportion of their lives to live in front of them. It is an incredibly sad thing to see.

The Government commissioned a report from Dr. Austin O'Carroll, the north inner-city GP specialising in healthcare for marginal groups. He found that people homeless for 18 months had a mortality rate eight times that of people homeless for six months. Homelessness, therefore, is a cause of death. It is a significant element of the reason people are dying on the streets. This is an issue that is not being focused on and, indeed, when we have raised it, we have actually seen the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, try to downplay the statistics we have brought forward. In one response, he said some of these people were actually dying because of car accidents, for example. It is exceptionally important to recognise that homelessness is a cause of death and it needs to be tackled in this context.

About 100,000 people are in housing distress across the country now. Many people are paying the majority of their earnings either in rent or mortgage repayments. Tens of thousands of people are on the precipice of homelessness. These are ordinary people and workers who, basically, are one month's rent away from being homeless in the context of incurring the cost of repairing a broken clutch in their car or the potential pig ignorance of a landlord. The fact is we are living in a society that leaves families in such a precarious state. It would not take much to simply add in fixity of tenure and to be able to tell people that if they fulfil their responsibilities according to their contract in terms of paying the rent and ensuring the house is kept in good order, then they will be able to stay in that house for either a specific length of time, a ten-, 15- or 20-year period, or in perpetuity.

The Government, though, will not give that confidence to people. So many people are calling my office regularly and sitting in front of me in clinics and saying, "Peadar, I have no idea where we are going to go." They are in a state of panic and you can see the fear written across their faces. We are in the jaws of an emergency now, and what is the Government's response to it? This is the real issue I have. I have mentioned this next point before, namely, that I believe there is an extreme level of Government incompetence currently. Some of this is because the Government has been in power for so long, while some of it is because many people in Government have not held down a job outside of it for so long.

Looking at the situation right now, the response to a parliamentary question submitted by Aontú showed that, between all the local authorities, there are 3,500 local authority homes empty today. They are empty. Nobody is living in them. There are actually enough local authority homes existing for all the people who are homeless to be able to live in. Obviously there is going to be some churn in the number of local authority homes that are empty. This is natural. The point is that when private rental accommodation is flipped, it takes an average of three weeks for that to be relet to another family. What is the average time for a local authority house? It is eight months on average. It takes on average eight months for local authorities in this country to get such a property back into use. This is an incredible indictment of the level of administration happening in local authorities and the Government now.

The schemes the Government is providing are incredible. It has created this network of schemes, it says, to get people back into vacant houses. The idea that we have 160,000 vacant homes in a housing crisis is similar to having ships leaving this country with food in the middle of a famine. It is just atrocious that we would have this happening. The Government has created a fund to get vacant houses properly refurbished. It was launched in July 2022. So far, the number of people who have received a payment from this grant has been 70 in a year and a half. The grant has been paid out for 70 houses out of 160,000 empty houses in a year and a half. This means the Government is spending about €250,000 a month on grants to get empty homes back into use. The disparity in the proportion of the action by the Government to the size of the crisis is immense. It would take 3,300 years for the Government to get all these empty houses back into use if it kept delivering this particular grant at the same rate. It is an incredible situation.

Eviction is the other issue significantly feeding homelessness. I refer to no-fault evictions. We in Aontú submitted an amendment when the Bill in this regard was last discussed and voted on in the House to inject some level of compassion into the Government's proposals and to give a chance for the Government to help those in need. Our proposed amendment was very simple. It sought to provide protections against eviction for people who had fulfilled their responsibilities as tenants but who had a disability, were suffering from cancer, had a severe illness, were

pregnant, had a very young child or were over the age of 65. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party TDs voted against that proposed amendment. I feel that is an indictment of the Government's approach to this issue. It could not even make an exception in this regard.

During the period of the previous Government, representatives of vulture funds got to visit the Department of Finance 150 times. When the finance committee asked representatives of those vulture funds to come before it, they appeared zero times. The vulture funds are a product of Fine Gael policy. They are creating excess demand in the system that is pushing up rents and house prices, and they are doing this based on paying no tax. It must come to an end.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: With all due respect to the Minister of State, it was the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, whom I wanted to have in front of me. I refer to some of the comments he made in his introduction when he started talking about the Land Development Agency, LDA. Much of what he was talking about is a crock of bull. I hate to put it that way, but it is.

The LDA was set up to deal with infrastructure within 15 minutes of cities. This is what the Government set it up to do. In my area, this brings in Patrickswell, Adare, Croom, Ballyneety and Crecora, which are all about 15 minutes from Limerick city, but it wipes out the rest of County Limerick. In Croom, permission has been granted to build 135 houses. There is also a new water scheme that got funding of €5 million. I do not know if the company is Uisce Éireann or Irish Water, but whatever it is called these days, it has got funding to put in a water supply. A 100-person nursing home is to be built there too, as well as housing for the elderly and a crèche facility for progression of the primary school. A letter came from Uisce Éireann three months ago to say it wants €400,000 to investigate the infrastructure in Croom to see if it is possible to build houses. The company went to the landowners looking for this development fee.

Usually, when people want to build houses, the infrastructure is provided by the Government and then those people pay a fee per house when they build the houses. Irish Water, however, is looking for €400,000 for a survey, even though a survey was done previously when the Croom system was taken over from the Government by Irish Water or Uisce Éireann or whatever the company is called today. At the moment, therefore, 135 houses, a nursing home and houses for the elderly are being held up because of funding and infrastructure. The sewerage system in Croom now has enough capacity for 300 people. It is under severe pressure and needs maintenance. When the new road was being built to service the school in Croom, I said the extra infrastructure required should be put in because in the Government's plans, in the context of the LDA, it wanted to invest in areas 15 minutes from Limerick city. It did not do that.

I have been a contractor all my life and I can see that when infrastructure is to be put in place, it should be done when roads are being put in.

8 o'clock

You increase the size of the pipes and everything else to make sure the services are there to allow houses to be built. Did the Government listen? No. Does it listen to anything we say in this House? It then has to do U-turns afterwards and look for investment. Last week, I spoke about five sites in Kilmallock that were offered to the county council. The person in question even offered to build the houses and then offer them back to the local authority but has not got a phone call. The Government says there is a housing crisis. Why is that? The council has now been informed that it is not to buy any more sites or houses and that it is to leave them to agencies. That is why.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I welcome this debate and thank Sinn Féin for bringing it forward but I also want to highlight one issue. Sinn Féin has made 11 points in the motion being debated tonight but I would like it if it had 12. The thing I would like to see Sinn Féin highlighting is its own contribution to the housing crisis. I will give an example. Between objecting to zoning and objecting to planning applications, it has objected to 5,121 units of housing in 18 votes in Dublin City Council alone. Its representatives have made objections in Mayo and Wicklow and to 853 units on Oscar Traynor Road, 768 units at O'Devaney Gardens and 1,500 units in the Fingal County Council area. They only objected to 1,200 units in Donabate. Sinn Féin representatives have also made objections to 500 social, affordable and private houses in Tallaght. One TD here has objected to more than 2,000 units while another has objected to five developments comprising a total of 1,102 build-to-rent residential homes. An awful lot of houses they are objecting to are social and affordable. I have asked Sinn Féin Members about this before. They know I am not a critic of their party. I am not. I look at every group and thank them for their contribution. However, Sinn Féin is talking about housing here and there are people on the other side of the Chamber who shout about housing an awful lot as well but, if you look at what they do at home in their own constituencies, you will see they continuously object to people zoning land to build houses on and to actual planning applications. An awful lot of these TDs and county councillors are from Sinn Féin but it is not an exclusive Sinn Féin club. There are people in other parties, again including those on the other side of the House, who also object. I am not able to understand that.

If there is something wrong with me and if I am wrong, I would like somebody to stand up tonight, criticise me and say why I am wrong. If the Minister of State thinks I am wrong, I would like him to tackle me. I would like somebody to give out to me and to say I am wrong and that every time he or she objected to zoning or people putting a roof over their head that he or she was right and that those people should not have had their house. If somebody can put that argument up to me, I will debate it with him or her any day of the week. It would be some day in hell before I objected to anybody having a roof over his or her head.

I will give a good big clap on the back to any developers or people who have the - I will not say what - to build houses. If they can go to the local authority and convince it to zone land, more good to them. There is nothing wrong with that. It is not a dirty word. There is nothing wrong with being a building contractor with "building contractor" written on the side of your van and being out at 6 a.m. How are we going to have homes? How are we going to have places for people to live if they are not allowed to get planning permission? There are people pontificating in here every night. You would get sick of it. They are continuously on about this but, when they go home, they bring out a piece of paper and write a big long objection about overshadowing somebody else or doing one thing or another. Jesus and God almighty, it would drive you into the mental home. I really have to condemn it in the strongest possible way.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank Sinn Féin for putting forward this motion. In November, Ireland had 13,514 people, including 4,105 children, in emergency or homeless accommodation, according to the Department of housing. The homelessness crisis in Ireland is growing due to this Government's lack of action. This is causing distress for many people, especially children, and is now considered a national problem. Those facing housing insecurity are being overlooked by the political system. In November 2023, the number of homeless people was 335 higher than in the previous month and 17% higher than in November 2022. Since the current Government took office in the summer of 2020, homelessness in Ireland has increased significantly. The number of homeless individuals has risen from 8,702 to 13,514, an increase

of 55.3%. Including all those in hostels and rough sleepers, the actual number of homeless people is closer to 20,000. Many others are forced to live in their childhood bedrooms or to rely on family and friends. The true extent of Ireland's homelessness crisis is much greater than the recorded 55% increase since this Government came to power. This shows a growing crisis and a Government that seems uncaring.

Despite promises, the Government has failed to reduce homelessness. This failure has left thousands without a stable home, highlighting the need for effective solutions and a commitment to tackling homelessness. The Government's handling of the homelessness crisis lacks decisive action and fails to prioritise the needs of the vulnerable. The Government is neglecting the basic needs of Irish citizens. The number of children in emergency accommodation in Ireland has surpassed 4,000 for the first time. This alarming statistic shows the Government's failure to address the homelessness crisis effectively.

We can also look at bigger issues such as people objecting, which Deputy Healy-Rae has spoken about. To be quite honest, that is an outrageous scandal regardless of where the objections are coming from. People seem to be literally driving around looking at planning proposals and putting in objections to people's applications. There is a situation in my constituency, and probably in every other constituency, with planning permissions and nobody in this Government is willing to tackle it. People want to get out on their own. They have found their own loans, have their own bit of ground at home and are willing to go through everything required for planning permission but they are being hit with one snag after another in a brutal effort to make sure they do not get a home on their own farm.

Last year, we put forward a proposal regarding log cabins. The Rural Independent Group was proud to do that. That would at least help with the situation. If everybody was singing from the same hymn sheet, the numbers would start to reduce. However, if they are not, they will not. Permission for log cabins is refused. They could be a good start for a young person or couple starting out. I know many young couples who started out in log cabins at the bottom of the garden. Nobody knew they were there and no objections were made. However, if they go through the planning process, the planners object to them. There are many solutions that would help but the Government is not working towards those solutions.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will also thank Sinn Féin for the motion. I welcome the opportunity to speak on it. I agree with almost all of it. I welcome that Sinn Féin wants to bring forward measures to effectively ban investment funds and many of the other things set out in the motion but I have great concerns about the use of emergency planning and procurement powers so I will reserve my position on that.

In contrast with the Rural Independent Group, I have not come across anybody who has made an objection or complaint. What people make are submissions expressing their concerns. The planning legislation provides for that and it is vitally important. Indeed, the courts have repeatedly said that the role of the individual outside of the two parties is extremely important for our democracy and have praised the role that individuals have played. I hate going back but, when I was elected in 1999, my biggest difficulty was with the underfunding and under-resourcing of the planning authorities, which remains an issue to this day. I understand there are hundreds of vacancies.

A second issue is the continuous reduction of the involvement of the public. Because of repeated myths such as the suggestion that people are objecting for no reason, we brought in

legislation to preclude people who did not make a submission at local authority level from doing so at the level of An Bord Pleanála. Then we brought in fees to further discourage people from taking part in the planning process. Throughout all this time, my experience was that the difficulty was interference with planning law by various means by big developers and by planning permission being given with certain conditions and those conditions never being complied with. We saw that when the planning tribunal reported. Does the Minister of State remember that? We are inclined to forget the planning tribunal that cost a fortune and set out the systemic misuse of the planning laws from top to bottom. I cannot remember the words it used. The Minister of State might help me. I am getting tired in the evening. However, it spoke about the abuse of the planning laws on a systemic basis and money repeatedly changing hands. From 1999 to now, I have had the privilege of being a city councillor and a TD. As with health, I have watched the failure to invest in local authorities and the continuous removal of power from them, whether by leaving vacancies or by not giving enough money and then blaming them. I am a critic of local authorities but never of their staff. I certainly criticise some of the management but, most important, I criticise the Government policies that have seen them starved of funds and a role. They now spend their time privatising and outsourcing. I could count on one hand the number of people directly employed as plasterers, carpenters, electricians and so on. Everything has been privatised.

I have watched a housing crisis deliberately being allowed to come into being, following Government policy. Back when I was a proud member of the Labour Party, one of the first speeches I made was at a Labour Party conference on the unaffordability of housing. I remember pointing to headlines in *The Irish Times* at the time on the cost of housing. Does the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, remember the Kenny report? It was published more than half a century ago - 51 years ago. It told us there was a huge problem at the time and we needed to give local authorities power to acquire land at existing use value with a 25% bonus for the owners. It clearly pointed out that we needed to do something 51 years ago.

If we fast forward to 1999, when I was elected, there was a housing crisis. Houses were built every year and the progress was outlined in a quarterly report that told us where and how we were building and when construction would be completed. Then in 2009 we moved to the last column, "construction suspended", never to build a house again. I am not given to exaggeration. As the facts are so damning, I do not need to exaggerate. Not a single public house was built from 2009 until 2020 or 2021. That is a significant part of the problem.

I have been a Member of this House since 2016 and have grabbed every moment, whether through Sinn Féin motions, our own motions or at any other opportunity, to highlight that there is an alternative vision for this country in the context of housing. The current situation has been deliberately created through reliance on the market. The market has repeatedly failed and each Government. It is extraordinary that the three Government parties continue with this reliance in light of the damning figures.

The figures trip off our tongues as though they do not mean anything. There are 13,514 people in homeless accommodation, of whom 4,105 are children. Various experts have pointed out that is an underestimate. The Government does not tell us this in so many words, but my interpretation is that those people are just collateral damage. The Government tells us the housing policy is brilliant even though the numbers in emergency accommodation keep rising and there are appalling figures for deaths on our streets. I walk past people on the street every night as I go to my hotel. I wonder what is happening to me as I look at the recesses at the front of the Gaiety Theatre, which have become a bedroom for somebody. I ask what has happened to me

and this country. At one stage, we were outraged that there were people sleeping on the ground. I watch as the seagulls come over and take the little brown bag that sits beside the person. I watch various voluntary groups give out money and blankets and I say I am part of this Dáil that is allowing this to happen. This is an obscenity.

I am so tired of the Government's spin. I want to work with it because I think there is a solution. An integral part of the solution is to face the facts. The Simon Community tells us the position as is through its 32nd snapshot of 16 areas. The study examined the availability of property in 16 areas. In nine of those areas, there was no property available under the main Government scheme, namely, HAP. Galway city was among the nine areas, while there was one property available in Galway county. That is the position. This is its 32nd snapshot. Surely any Minister worth their salt would say, "Jesus, we are doing something wrong here. How is that happening when our main scheme is HAP?"

I will look first at Galway city and then move to the county. The famous Galway social housing task force, which I have mentioned often, has been sitting for more than five years but we still have not got a single comprehensive report from it analysing the situation in Galway. It gets more presentations from homeless groups on the ground to tell us the situation is getting worse. Part of the solution for Galway city and county is to build public housing on public land. I am not looking for affordable housing or other housing. There is a need to build public housing on public land and extend the income limits in order that there is a diverse range of people there. The Government should stop the negotiation that is going on in respect of the docklands, which will give land to the Land Development Agency at a premium price for premium housing. Does the Minister of State think selling off land to fund an extension into the sea that cannot go ahead if one takes storms realistically and believes what is happening in the context of climate change is a solution to an emergency in Galway? As regards Ceannt Station, approximately 14 acres in the centre of Galway are being developed by that body without any connection with the other bodies.

As regards the county, is cathair dhátheangach í ar thairseach na Gaeltachta is mó sa tír. Maidir leis an gCeathrú Rua agus an córas séarachais; níl aon chóras ann agus tá an séarachas amh, the raw sewage, ag dul díreach isteach san uisce. Ní féidir aon rud a thógáil ansin mar níl an córas cuí don aidhm. In Carraroe, there has been no treatment facility for 20-something years. We tabled questions on the matter but were told it is nothing to do with the Minister but, rather, it is to do with Irish Water. A most unsuitable site was picked, with all the eggs in one basket, if you will excuse the bad pun. I could call what is in the basket something other than eggs. In terms of delivery, there has been nothing.

We could have balanced regional development, as well as balanced county and city development, but it is simply not happening. We have any amount of schemes with no vision. There is no vision because there is no acknowledgement that we cannot have a Republic based on the market. The market has a role but, for a democracy and a Republic, we need homes. They are the most basic and fundamental segment of society that will give security and allow people to participate. Instead of that, we have a jigsaw without a picture, as well as boasting about a first-time buyers' scheme that is simply keeping the price of houses too high. The Government says that my colleagues and I do not want people to own their own homes. I do want people to own their own homes, but at an affordable price. I do not want them to have to work every God-given hour to get a mortgage they cannot even afford in the first place.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I welcome the motion, as I do any motion that offers so-

lutions to end homelessness. The motion covers eight main points and I will do my best to address them in the time afforded to me. I welcome any measure to increase the supply and pipeline of affordable housing. Shannon, County Clare, has a population of more than 10,000. People from all over the mid-west are employed there. The town provides third level education and has an international airport. Unfortunately, I often hear from employers who cannot get staff because there is nowhere for them to live. We need to build social and affordable housing at scale in this country and use all available resources. I met the Land Development Agency at the housing committee this afternoon. I welcome that its next phase will include towns such as Ennis and Shannon.

I welcome the various points made in respect of ending homelessness for children and those aged over 55 and increasing Housing First tenancies. To do so, however, we need to get the actual picture of the homeless crisis. The way the figures are based only on those accessing emergency accommodation, the number of whom is now at an all-time high, is flawed. It fails to grasp the true gravity of the crisis. How can we address the problem if the Government has not admitted how bad the problem is? We need to expand the definition of “homeless”, as I have been suggesting to the Minister for the past year. I will continue to do so until I am blue in the face. Unless you have been homeless or at risk of facing homelessness, you have no idea of the mental and personal cost to you and your family, and that is the huge problem. Every person who is homeless matters. It is about time the Government recognised them.

It makes total sense to reinvest all moneys saved from emergency accommodation into homelessness prevention. I call on the Minister to provide additional step-down beds for those exiting refuges. Clare Haven Services has brought this up with me many times in recent years as its number one priority for housing. The lack of step-down beds is preventing women and children from accessing refuges and the support needed. The number of beds needs to be vastly increased. I was happy to support the motion on the increase in stamp duty and investment funds. However, as I said at the time, I do not believe 21% is enough. Their pockets are deep and Government must get to the bottom of them.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): There were 19 contributors. I want to acknowledge the importance of the debate. I really want to echo what the Minister said and to reaffirm our commitment to tackling homelessness and solving the housing crisis. Since the formation of this Government, we have been committed to long-term sustainable solutions to homelessness, accelerating the supply of homes including building of sufficient social and affordable homes. We are fully aware. The recent rise in homelessness is of course of serious concern to everyone here on the Government side, and no doubt on the Opposition side as well. We take this very seriously. We know the impact it has on individual families. We have put €242 million in the budget for this year, up from €215 million last year. Resourcing is not an issue. We are redoubling our efforts to prevent further homelessness. I refer to the tenant *in situ* scheme. There were 1,700 acquisitions last year of social housing, the majority of those under the scheme. To date this year, we have 1,600 houses under purchase with many of those tenancies under way. The cost rental tenant in situ scheme has 47 completed. We would like to see more coming forward in that area.

We have seen a small decrease in certain areas, particularly in October, in single adults in emergency accommodation in mid-east, the midlands, mid-west and south east compared to October. There was a small fall in the number of families accessing emergency accommodation in the west. However, the figures are too high and we acknowledge that point. We are working closely with local authorities and NGOs to support them to help people exit homelessness. In

the first nine months of last year, 2,000 adults exited from homelessness. That was an increase on the previous year. There were 2,500 preventions. That is up on the same period from 2022. In the last quarter of last year, we saw an increase of 14% or 1,585 people exiting and preventions from homelessness.

I want to deal in facts. We had a debate here and Members are talking about facts. There has been delivery on social and affordable housing. More than 10,263 social houses were completed last year. They were not all purchased. There were 7,433 new builds, the highest in many years. There were 960 acquisitions and 1,870 leases. Ask anyone who wants social housing. They are not concerned whether the house they are being provided with is built by a local authority or leased or acquired. Furthermore, there were nearly 9,675 in a combination of RAS and HAP. This year alone we have seen over 2,500 up to the quarter. The majority come through in the last quarter. I would advise the Deputy to hold her full comment until she sees the outcome of the last quarter.

In terms of social housing, there is the focus on affordable homes to rent and buy. Some €250 million has been approved for affordable housing fund delivery of more than 4,000 affordable homes in 67 projects across 20 local authorities. From a starting point of zero, 1,800 homes were delivered last year. In excess of 2,000 affordable homes are to be delivered in the first nine months of this year. Deputy Stanley said no affordable cost rentals were being progressed in County Laois; there are. There is an application in before the Department for Portlaoise in terms of affordable cost rental. There has been delivery of affordable purchase in Stradbally.

The Croí Cónaithe scheme has had 6,220 applications, of which 3,400 have been approved. Only 103 have been paid but that is a bit of a red herring. Anyone who has been approved under the scheme has 30 months to do the works so they are going to be drawing down at a later period.

On many of the points Deputies have raised, we all want the same thing here. It is not fair to say that there has not been delivery; there has. I will touch on a few points that were raised by Members during the debate. We spoke about the whole issue in terms of the investment funds purchasing homes. Deputies neglected to state that following the changes in the planning laws since May 2021, approximately 42,000 properties have been given the owner-occupier guarantee. They are homes that are ensured to be available for owner-occupiers, which is hugely important. Less than 1% of the homes were actually purchased by the funds. As the Minister said, Sinn Féin must provide details of its alternative plan. Deputies stated the average house price should be €300,000. That is an unrealistic price and they should be honest with the people out as to how they are going to do that. Anyone who buys a home will have no control over their home. The site will continue to be owned by the State. If they want to rent their home, they cannot. If they want to sell their home, it is at the control of the State. The schemes we have in place make the purchase of houses affordable. The Sinn Féin scheme will bring about negative equity. More than 40,000 people have availed of the help-to-buy scheme. Sinn Féin continues to speak about it. The party has put on record that it will abolish the scheme. In one of its reviews, the Central Bank has stated that the scheme provides a major advantage to people in putting a deposit together. It has very little impact on inflation. It is only people getting their tax back that they have already paid. Sinn Féin opposed the first home scheme. That allows the State to go in and basically provide an equity stake that people can buy out, unlike the party's scheme, where the site they are on will be owned by the State, effectively.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is right.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: When people buy a home, they should have control over that home. We cannot have them just as glorified tenants. It is hugely important for Sinn Féin to spell it out. It is very well to throw out a figure of €300,000 without putting flesh on it. With the schemes we have, including the local authority affordable housing scheme, people can get up to a 40% discount and still quality for the help-to-buy scheme. We changed that in the last budget to deal with people who can purchase whose income is not very high. On the first home scheme, people can get up to a 30% discount and at up 20% they still get access to the help-to-buy scheme. On the Croí Cónaithe scheme, Sinn Féin needs to be honest with people. Is the party for it or against it? From what I can see, it is looking to abolish the scheme, yet at the same time it is calling it the same scheme but it is not the same scheme. Someone who gets the Croí Cónaithe scheme can purchase a house that has been unoccupied for two years, get a €50,000 grant, or €70,000 if it is derelict, and SEAI grants as well. More than 6,120 people have availed of that to date. The question is: is Sinn Féin for it or against it? The party wants to abolish the LDA. Will it abolish the LDA? The LDA is going to build a substantial number of homes. We would like it to happen faster but the agency is building a substantial number of homes this year. It will invest €1 billion in 2024. We need to see flesh on the bones. What exactly is Sinn Féin's alternative plan? Deputy Ó Broin said he would bring it out, yet we have not seen it. He has certainly flown many kites but if he is in government, he will have to make those hard-core decisions at a point in time and show judgment. When the riots were on in Dublin city, Sinn Féin blinked and did not make the right decisions. In the cold heat of being in government, Government has to make decisions. There were 30,000 units built last year, exceeding targets. We will exceed targets again this year. We are building social, affordable and cost-rental housing. We are providing schemes to make homes affordable. The difference with our scheme is that it allows people to get on the property ladder and makes it affordable, but they control their home, unlike Sinn Féin that proposes to bring in a scheme which effectively does not add up. I think Deputy Ó Broin owes it to the people to spell out exactly what he is proposing.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Last year, 88 families and 166 children entered emergency accommodation in Cork city. In April, after the Government cruelly lifted the eviction ban, 32 children were forced to leave their homes and to sleep in a hotel, almost double the number in March. Cork city Accommodation Placement Service saw a 26% increase in the number of presentations, and a total of 938 individuals. It saw a 49% increase in 2022, with more than 5,000 repeat representations. Can the Minister of State please ask the Minister the straightforward question that I asked him last year? How many children must become homeless before he will resign and before he, the Minister of State and this Government will accept its policies have failed? There are now 4,150 homeless children. Must it be 4,500 or 5,000 children? How many children must become homeless before the Government admits it is wrong and its strategy does not work? Those are the figures. The Minister of State has listed figures and talked about all the different schemes that are available. We have an all-time high of people and children using homeless services, an all-time high in rents and an all-time high in relation to house prices. Looking at the homeless figures we have, they are only a fraction of the real figures we get when we talk to the Simon Community and other organisations.

I will provide a couple of examples. I know of a woman who is 34 weeks pregnant. She was in my office on Monday. When she comes out of hospital - God is good and when the child is born hopefully everything will be fine - she will be homeless. Can you imagine that? She

will be homeless. I know of another person who has a four-year-old daughter who has been couch-surfing between friends and family since 2022. She is not even part of the statistics. The Government does not even know who she is. Finally, I know of a mother with two young sons who has been 15 months in emergency accommodation. The only thing those boys will remember is growing up in a hotel. For all the Minister of State's statistics and figures, these are real life people.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Hear, hear.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I listened with interest to the debate all evening. While I was listening to it, I got an email from a man in Mayo. I want to read a couple of extracts from it. It reads: "I am currently homeless. I have a full-time job. I am living out of my car in between work and seeing my four children. I have no money towards getting a deposit for a house. I am currently sitting in my car, with €30 to my name, in the wind and the rain, writing this email." That is while the Minister of State sits here and slaps himself on the back, saying Sinn Féin is not going to do it for that man or for the other men or women and children in Mayo. Fine Gael, not Sinn Féin, is the party that brought homelessness to Mayo. That is a fact, not like the nonsense that was being spouted by a colleague earlier.

Fine Gael has now been joined by Fianna Fáil in doing that, as more and more people are driven into homelessness. Month after month the numbers increase, and there is failure after failure to get to grips with the housing crisis. People are falling between the incompetency of Government and the bureaucratic system that paralyses local authorities from fulfilling their statutory responsibility to deliver housing. I am very short on time, but I want to say that not a single social or affordable house was built in Mayo in the first nine months of 2023. I struggle to understand how that is even possible. Every week all through 2022, we were told that everything possible was being done to build houses, for us to see each month; of the first nine months of 2023, not a single home was built. It was not until November that any houses were delivered. I welcome those and they are sorely needed, but it is far short of what is needed and far short of the modest targets. The Government said it would build 151 social and affordable homes in Mayo. It has not even nearly come close.

Many others are not even able to get on to the housing waiting list, on top of the 1,235 people that are on that list. Everyone suffers when the Government fails to deliver. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have designed and delivered a housing policy that continues to destroy the lives of many people in Mayo and other areas. The disturbing cost of the psychological damage being done to children, who have nowhere to call home, will impact generations to come. This will be the Government's legacy, the commodifying of desperately needed homes and the lining of the pockets of the vulture funds who continue to make millions on the backs of the people I am talking about.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The motion before us today is about homelessness. I think it was very telling that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, spoke for ten minutes, and only 30 seconds of that were about the issue of homelessness. I counted it on the clock. When the Minister of State started to speak about this same issue, he talked about the recent rise in homelessness. The Minister of State has been in government for 12 years. Every single year since his party has been in government, seven of them propped up by the Tánaiste's Fianna Fáil, homelessness has increased. Despite the fact that the Government claims record levels of investment, record levels of output and historic records of social housing, homelessness is now at its highest levels ever. Contrary to the Minister of State's claim that we do not propose alternatives, and I prob-

ably have more housing policy documents and legislation published than almost anybody else in this House, we put a number of very basic propositions to the Government. They were sensible suggestions to reverse the damage the Government's housing policies are doing to men, women and children who are being forced into homelessness.

We proposed increasing the social housing targets. We got no answer and no response. We suggested using emergency fund procurement powers and new building technologies to supply a further additional stream of social housing, exclusively for people who are in emergency accommodation, to accelerate the exits which collapsed in recent years. We got no response. We said we need to prioritise homelessness among the over 55s, which is at its highest level ever and is one of the most shocking indictments of this Government, and also to prioritise increasing the exits of families with children, because no child should spend two or three years in emergency accommodation, and that is what the Government's housing policy allows. A very simple proposition is to double the Housing First tenancies. We have the highest level of single people in emergency accommodation in decades. The Government has a target of around 240,000 Housing First tendencies a year. It is a good scheme and I supported it before it was this Government's policy. We should double the target to 500,000 and accelerate the exits. We have also proposed that as the number of people in emergency accommodation are reduced, which is something that would happen if Sinn Féin was in government, we should ring-fence the money that is currently spent on emergency accommodation and increase investment in supports to sustain tendencies and prevention. We got no answer to that. We want the Government to expand the tenant *in situ* scheme and, crucially, to fix the problems with the scheme in the cost-rental tenant *in situ*. It is not working. We told the Government the same thing over a year ago with social rental tenant *in situ*. It ignored us and lost valuable time. Do not do it a second time.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The Deputy is wrong on that.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I urge the Government not to do it a second time around. We have called on the Government to increase the funding for domestic violence refuges. We have about a third of the refuge space that is required for women and children fleeing domestic violence and coercive control. We have no got answer from the Government on that as well. Crucially, we have called for the reintroduction of the ban on no-fault evictions. We know what the Government's position is on that because it voted down our legislation in December.

We tabled a series of propositions so we could have a discussion, and neither the Minister of State nor the Minister addressed any of them. With respect to the Government's so-called progress, here is the problem. Yes, it is true that more new-build social homes were delivered the year before last than anytime since 1975. Since then, our population has doubled, and in the 1970s, we had a surplus of social housing in our large local authorities. The level of need for social housing today is more than double what it was in the 1970s, so if we want to make an intelligent comparison, we would need to double the output beyond what the Government it has delivered.

With respect to affordable housing, in 2020, I published a very detailed policy document setting out exactly how we would deliver large volumes of affordable homes, something the Government is not doing. In my constituency, in the case of one of the Government's affordable homes funded through the affordable housing fund, the full cost to the buyer is €425,000. In what world is that affordable?

We have set out our alternatives. The Government has ignored them and misrepresents them. It will not even talk about the issue under debate tonight. Its head is in the sand, it is making this problem worse, and the sooner we get rid of its parties from government, the better, not just for us but for those people whom the Government's housing policies are failing year after year. Shame on the Minister of State for again defending the indefensible. I commend the motion to the House.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Military Neutrality

49. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the timeframe in which he intends to bring forward proposals to remove the triple lock neutrality protection; when he expects the legislation to be enacted; and which missions he envisages the Defence Forces participating in from which they are currently precluded. [2988/24]

Deputy Matt Carthy: What is the timeframe in which the Tánaiste intends to bring forward his regrettable proposals to remove the triple lock neutrality protection? When does he expect the legislation to be enacted? Will he outline on this occasion the missions in which he envisages the Defence Forces will participate from which they are currently precluded?

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Micheál Martin): I thank the Deputy for raising the question. Any modification to the triple lock will continue to require Government and Dáil approval for the dispatch of Defence Forces personnel to take part in peacekeeping and similar missions. Second, it will do nothing to change Ireland's traditional position of military neutrality, which is characterised by Ireland's non-participation in any military alliance.

The Deputy will be aware that last year's consultative forum on international security policy featured a well-informed discussion on the issue of UN peacekeeping and the triple lock, contributed to by a wide and varied perspective of views on this matter. It was a very good discussion, well informed and not partisan in any way, and it was subsequently reflected in the chair's report. This debate provided ample evidence of ways in which to continue Ireland's long-standing record on peacekeeping while ensuring adherence to the highest standards of international law.

Clearly, we need a new process to replace the current system, which effectively allows UN Security Council members to bind Ireland's hands in its international engagement. While not being prescriptive about what changes will be made, I have instructed officials in my Department to prepare legislative proposals without delay that would govern the future overseas deployments of our Defence Forces. Work on the preparation of those legislative proposals is progressing, with a view to bringing them to the Government in due course. Any proposals

agreed by the Government will then have to be presented to, and debated and approved, by the Dáil and Seanad, thus providing the Oireachtas with ample opportunity to scrutinise any such proposals. Any legislative proposals will remain fully consistent with the principles of the UN charter and international law.

The Government has no plans for the Defence Forces to participate in any further overseas missions at present. Indeed, and extremely regrettably, however, no new peacekeeping missions have been approved by the UN Security Council since 2014. Given the volatility in international security today, we need in the future to be able to deploy our Defence Forces to peacekeeping and crisis response missions speedily and with agility, irrespective of whether they are led by the UN, the EU or another regional organisation.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I still cannot get my head around how the Tánaiste can use the phrase “irrespective of whether” a mission is led by the UN or another body. We all know that under international law and the UN charter, it is UN-approved missions that have the status of peacekeeping missions. Otherwise, anybody could describe any military mission as a peacekeeping one.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not true.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In fact, some very aggressive military hostilities, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have been framed in the terms of peacemaking or peacekeeping, and there is a reason there is a UN framework in place to set that out.

The Tánaiste outlined that there will be Oireachtas approval. Will he assure us there will be no attempt at any stage to either guillotine or minimise any level of Oireachtas oversight? As I have said repeatedly and will reiterate, there is no democratic mandate for this. The Tánaiste’s party’s own manifesto set out clearly the protection of the triple lock as a core tenet of enshrining our neutrality, and the programme for Government did likewise. Will he give a commitment in respect of Dáil oversight that no guillotine will be applied and that there will be no attempt to subvert any stage of the legislation?

Deputy Micheál Martin: We were recently a member of the Security Council for two years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which the Deputy mentioned, is a catalyst for change because Russia, at the moment, has a veto on whether we would ever participate in a peacekeeping mission sanctioned by the UN Security Council. Surely the Deputy is not suggesting our hands should be tied, in terms of participation in peacekeeping, by Russia. I know that in 2014, his party had a different view and kind of acquiesced in Russia’s invasion of Crimea, when it did not raise the issue anywhere, but it has opposed the current invasion. I do not understand how we could allow Russia to paralyse us.

To give an example, a possibility of a veto emerged in 2022 in respect of the renewal of UN authorisation for EUFOR, or Operation Althea, and Ireland was a member of the UN Security Council at the time. We were in a position to play a key role in securing the renewal of that UN mandate for that mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where five members of the Defence Forces were deployed. A similar case arose in 1999. There are a number of examples where the veto has been used to stop peacekeeping.

We should bear in mind that the UN has sanctioned the European Union as a peacekeeping entity, along with the African Union and regional bodies of that kind in the past.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I remind the Tánaiste the UN has sanctioned a peacekeeping mission in the Golan Heights for which our Defence Forces have quite rightly earned widespread praise for the way and the manner in which they have conducted themselves, and I would argue that peacekeeping mission is more important now than ever. We are withdrawing from that peacekeeping mission, not at the behest of Vladimir Putin but at the behest of Micheál Martin. He is the man who is withdrawing our troops from that peacekeeping mission.

I will ask the Tánaiste one more time, because I am sure he is not suggesting we enter Ukraine, considering that no external forces are engaged in military or peacekeeping activity in that country at the moment. He has outlined on a number of occasions that he wants this legislative change to be made without delay. Where is it, therefore, that he wants to send members of the Defence Forces where they are currently precluded from going, given he has withdrawn them from the places where they were doing good work?

Deputy Micheál Martin: On military advice, I was asked to withdraw troops from the Golan Heights in the interests of consolidation, an issue we will deal with on a later question. We are participating in the EU battlegroup, as we have been doing for 20 years.

To give another example, a subsequent EU peacekeeping operation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia did not have a Security Council mandate and Ireland was unable to participate in that mission. More recently, in 2015, the European Union established a security mission in the Mediterranean Sea known as Operation Sophia. That mission did not have a UN mandate until 2016 and Ireland could not consider contributing to it until that mandate was in place. In 2017, the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre Narcotics, an international maritime intelligence centre supported by the EU, requested a Naval Service ship to assist with maritime drug interdiction operations. Although we are a strong supporter of the centre and were, in fact, one of the founding members, a ship could not be sent given there would be no UN mandate for such an operation.

Those are the kinds of examples we could be excluded from. There could very well be a mission if there were an effective Middle Eastern peace plan, such as through the Arab peace initiative-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Tánaiste.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Everybody has spoken generally about the need for an international force to guarantee security in Gaza, for example. We want the war to stop in Gaza and we have asked for a ceasefire. If it did stop, there would be a need-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Tánaiste.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We would argue that it would be far better to have an international security presence there to keep the peace than it would be to have Israeli security in Gaza suppressing people.

Deputy Matt Carthy: On that point, while I am a great believer in and advocate for peace in the Middle East, I would not advocate sending our troops there without a UN mandate. That is a debate for another day perhaps.

Defence Forces

50. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the number of members that left the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps in 2023; the number of new members recruited to each; the current membership of the Defence Forces; and the projected numbers by year-end 2024. [2989/24]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I ask the Minister for Defence the number of members who left the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps last year; the number of new members who were recruited; and therefore the current membership of each branch of the Defence Forces.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The military authorities have advised that as of 31 December 2023, the strength of the Permanent Defence Force stood at 7,550 personnel. A total of 750 personnel discharged in 2023 and 415 personnel were inducted. A table containing the requested breakdown by branch of these figures will be provided to the Deputy.

Every effort is being made to increase the strength of our Defence Forces. The high turnover and challenge with recruitment are being experienced worldwide. The Government has introduced many changes to make the Defence Forces an attractive option as a career choice and will continue to work with the Defence Forces to enhance recruitment and retention.

The Defence Forces have engaged a marketing and media partner to assist with recruitment advertising to ensure engagement with the recruitment demographic across social media and other media platforms. Specific advertising for specialist recruitment is placed in industry-specific publications and websites. As part of the Naval Service-specific recruitment campaign, phase 3 of a Naval Service recruitment advertisement will launch in the last week of January 2024.

The current marketing strategy for Defence Forces recruitment, Be More with the Irish Defence Forces, which was launched in 2022, aligns the desire of the target demographic to continuously improve and learn new skills while ensuring long-term career advancement by ably demonstrating opportunities and skills a career in the Defence Forces offers.

The Defence Forces continue to broadcast this message through regular visits to schools and frequent attendance at recruitment and career fairs and events. Furthermore, transition year students can avail of placements within the organisation to undertake various programmes across a number of locations, demonstrating career opportunities. We have made significant progress in improving the terms and conditions of personnel in the Permanent Defence Force. Actions taken include significant progress on basic pay, the roll-out of private secondary medical care to all ranks and the recent doubling of the amount of the patrol duty allowance payable to Naval Service personnel at sea after the first ten days in a calendar year.

At a recruitment briefing to me in December 2023, management in the Defence Forces outlined that the total projected induction figure for 2024 was 540. Given the current situation, I do not believe that figure to be ambitious enough. I have therefore instructed that additional enlisted personnel and cadets be recruited in 2024 beyond this figure and for military management to present a plan on how this will be achieved.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am sure the Tánaiste will accept that those figures are incredibly concerning. When this Government came into office, it inherited a crisis in terms of the numbers in the Defence Forces. The numbers at that point were 8,659. When the Tánaiste assumed

the role of Minister, that number had reduced to 7,966. If I recall the figure he gave correctly, it now stands at 7,550. The trend has not changed at all. While recruitment is ongoing and we welcome the initiatives that have been taken and we wish that process well, there is an elephant in the room. As well as having a recruitment crisis, there is, above all, a retention crisis. It is clear from the figures given that more people are leaving in any given year than are being recruited. Does the Tánaiste acknowledge that? Does he have any retention-specific measures to propose?

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have established the Defence Forces joint induction training centre in Gormanston, which will ultimately enable induction training to be provided to 900 recruits per annum. That is a significant investment. We have also appointed a specialist internal expertise group to go in, validate and advise on recruitment processes in the Permanent Defence Force, with a particular focus on the Naval Service. A report with detailed recommendations has recently been submitted to me. That is an important piece of work that will inform significant changes in how we recruit in the future.

There is no lack of interest in joining the Defence Forces, as evidenced by the 9,479 applications received across all competitions in 2023. That does not mean everyone who applies will follow up. I have put it to the Defence Forces that the conversion rate of those applications does not seem to be sufficient or high enough and we have to do more on that front.

On the retention front, we have increased the age at which people can join and we expect decisions shortly in respect of retirement ages being increased.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Tánaiste indicated that he does not think the Defence Forces are ambitious enough in their targets. I would make the same charge of the Government. In budget 2023, funding was provided to allow the recruitment of an additional 400 personnel, but that did not happen. In fact, as I said, the numbers actually went down further. This year, however, the funding provided in 2024 provides for the exact same target - an additional 400 people. I presume that is a net figure.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is net.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Does the Tánaiste accept that an additional 400 members, which would not even bring numbers up to where they were at this time last year, is not sufficient either? We are talking about the need to be more ambitious in our hopes and aspirations for the Defence Forces. Yes, we need the Defence Forces but, in the first instance, we need to see leadership and vision from the Government, and they are lacking.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I do not agree with that at all.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The numbers speak for themselves.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is a net increase. I have been in office for one year. I am determined to deal with this. There are a number of interlocking issues. This Government has dealt substantially with pay. On completion of training, recruits start at €38,000 in year one. That increases to €39,400 in year two and €40,700 in year three. School-leaver cadets, on commissioning, are paid €41,962, or essentially €42,000, and after two years, they are promoted to lieutenant and their pay rises to €47,000. For a graduate joining, the pay rate, on commissioning, is €47,000. On the pay front, significant work has been done, including on a whole range of allowances.

The retirement issue is important. We have had a series of meetings with my colleague, the Minister for public expenditure, and other Ministers specifically on the retention issue. This will be significant in reducing the number of those leaving the Defence Forces. It is a bit early to see the impact of the patrol duty allowance in the Naval Service, but we are hopeful it will have some impact.

Defence Forces

51. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence when negotiations with stakeholders regarding the terms of reference for the tribunal of inquiry into abuse allegations within the Defence Forces concluded; and if he secured full support and endorsement for his proposed terms of reference from stakeholder groups which brought the abuse allegations to light prior to bringing them to Cabinet. [2990/24]

Deputy Réada Cronin: I ask the Minister for Defence when the negotiations with stakeholders regarding the terms of reference for the tribunal of inquiry into abuse allegations within the Defence Forces concluded; and if he secured full support and endorsement for his proposed terms of reference from stakeholder groups which brought the abuse allegations to light prior to bringing them to Cabinet.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The report of the independent review group, which was established to examine dignity and equality issues in the Defence Forces, was published on 28 March 2023. The Government agreed to progress the recommendations contained in the report, which included the establishment of a statutory inquiry to identify systemic failures, if any, in the complaints system, in order to ensure accountability and transparency.

The draft terms of reference were prepared in consultation with the Attorney General and shared with a wide variety of interested parties. In July, I obtained the approval of the Government to establish a judge-led tribunal of inquiry, pursuant to the provisions of the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921, as amended.

I considered all views and observations received from a wide range of interested parties. There were a variety of views expressed at the stage of the formative tribunal. For instance, some people expressed the view that they would be reluctant to share their experiences in public. Other individuals and groups sought a statutory public inquiry and that is what we have done. While recognising and acknowledging publicly the very important role of the Women of Honour in bringing very serious allegations to public attention, I also had to consider the views of other interested parties, including my obligation to current serving members of the Defence Forces.

The draft terms of reference initially prepared and circulated last May were amended and expanded arising from the feedback received from the Women of Honour and other groups and following further discussions with the Attorney General.

9 o'clock

The terms of reference provide that the tribunal of inquiry will examine the effectiveness of the complaints processes in the Defence Forces concerning workplace issues relating to discrimination, bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and sexual misconduct and to investigate

the response to complaints made regarding the use of hazardous chemicals within Air Corps headquarters at Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnel.

The Government approved on Tuesday last the terms of reference for the tribunal. The Government also approved the appointment of Ms Justice Ann Power to chair the tribunal. I will be bringing a motion for resolution to establish the tribunal of inquiry before this House tomorrow.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Tánaiste for his reply on this extremely sensitive issue. The Women of Honour were clear when I spoke to them that when they, in turn, spoke to the Tánaiste around the terms of reference on 14 December, he said he would reflect on the matters they raised with him. It seems there is a clear breakdown in communication between his Department and the Women of Honour because they were certainly under the impression that he would be returning to them after a period of reflection and they fully expected to hear back from him. There is such a critical difference with regard to the Tánaiste's Department and the Women of Honour and it is not a good sign of things to come. It worries me that this shows a lack of respect and the old cultural view and the "we know better" way of doing things over people's heads. The Women of Honour were especially concerned around the proposed use of the wording "complaints of abuse" as opposed to what they saw as being "instances of abuse". They were certainly under the impression that negotiations with the Tánaiste had not concluded, so I will ask again whether he felt that negotiations had concluded.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am surprised with what the Deputy said and I do not think it is fair. There has been full respect on my side and there has been ongoing engagement. We actually met in January but the Deputy seems to suggest the last meeting was in December. We met again, we reflected, we changed and we made further inclusions, particularly in respect of the hazardous chemicals issue in Baldonnel. We changed on the instances issue. We dealt with that. People will be able to come forward and discuss what happened to them within the context of how the complaints system worked. We also included the issue of whether people were deterred or intimidated from making complaints. There was the question of reprisals, if they happened. All that is in the terms of reference.

The only outstanding issue when we concluded was that the Women of Honour's view on the random selection was that the judge had the authority, if she wished to exercise it. It is clear to me that the judge will hear all cases, but, for instance, if there are thousands of cases coming in, one has to make a provision for the judge to take a selection and to say that she can make conclusions in respect of what she has heard. The judge is very clear that she wants to hear all the people who come forward. That was the only issue. The idea of a random selection came from the legal representative of the Women of Honour in the first instance and we thought it was a good idea because it was trying to broaden out some aspects of the terms of reference.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Speaking of the Women of Honour and all the other stakeholders in this, we depend on our Defence Forces. The Tánaiste is so proud of them, as we all are, and we all want this tribunal of inquiry to work. It must work because it is an important tribunal and it has been long-awaited. The Tánaiste knows as well as anybody that if one makes a complaint in the Defence Forces, and this was reiterated earlier this afternoon in the audiovisual room, that it essentially puts an end to one's career, removes any kind of peace of mind in the workplace, and puts a target on one's back. It is all well and good saying that it is up to the judge to decide on complaints and on instances of abuse but the Woman of Honour were very specific with the Tánaiste when they met him before Christmas that they very much wanted to have instances

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of abuse rather than complaints of abuse in the terms of reference. I know that we will be discussing this tomorrow also and we have amendments which will be brought forward but I very much think the Tánaiste should look very favourably at our amendments tomorrow.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Women of Honour made very significant submissions in respect of this and during the various meetings we had. I believe we have had eight or nine meetings. In December we agreed to include “psychological harm” in the definition of abuse and that the tribunal may permit evidence of abuse and the consequences of abuse to be heard. We reflected that in the terms of reference and these have now been included in the finalised terms of reference.

In determining the format, we agreed there would be a statutory public inquiry, which was a request of the Women of Honour. I can give the Deputy a list: the statutory inquiry will be by way of tribunal of inquiry with the addition of “physical torture, physical assault, [and] psychological harm” in the definition of abuse; the inclusion of the Protected Disclosures Acts 2014 and 2022 in the definition of complaint processes; the investigation of whether complaints were actively deterred; whether there was a culture which discouraged the making of complaints; provision for safeguards for serving members who gave evidence to the tribunal; provision for the waiver of non-disclosure agreements; the tribunal may permit evidence of abuse and the consequences of abuse to be heard; provision for investigation of the response to complaints regarding the use of hazardous chemicals within the Air Corps headquarters in Baldonnell; and consider the adequacy of the complaints processes in light of what responses were received. These are all the provisions the Women of Honour sought and amendments which are in the terms of reference and were agreed. There are other areas on the suicide issue and the medical board, which will be decided by separate approaches.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Defence Forces

52. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the strength of the permanent Defence Force as of 1 January 2024; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2724/24]

65. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence what action he will be taking to stabilise the numbers within the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2600/24]

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Can the Tánaiste give me an update on the strengths of the Permanent Defence Forces as of 1 January 2024 and will he make a statement on the matter? This question No. 65 is grouped with question No. 52.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 52 and 65 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising the question. As I outlined earlier to Deputies, the military authorities have advised that as of 31 December 2023, the strength of the Permanent Defence Force stood at 7,550 personnel. A total of 750 personnel were discharged in 2023 and 415 personnel were inducted. The Commission on the Defence Forces stated in its report that it was satisfied that, in broad terms, levels of average turnover are not out of line with other military organisations internationally.

In an effort to stabilise numbers, I have instructed that additional enlisted personnel and cadets be recruited in 2024 beyond the projected induction figure, and for military management to respond with their plan to implement this action. An allocation of €1.23 billion for the defence sector in budget 2024, which includes a provision for the recruitment and training of at least a net additional 400 enlisted personnel in 2024, will assist in this regard.

Current strategies on recruitment in the Defence Forces will also support efforts to stabilise numbers. The Defence Forces have engaged a marketing and media partner to assist with recruitment advertising to ensure engagement with the recruitment demographic across social media and other media platforms. Specific advertising for specialist recruitment is placed in industry specific publications and websites. As part of the Naval Service specific recruitment campaign, phase 3 of a Naval Service recruitment advertisement will launch in the last week of January 2024.

I discussed earlier the Be More with the Irish Defence Forces campaign which continues to talk about opportunities in the Defence Forces.

The establishment of the joint induction training centre in Gormanstown will also greatly assist with recruitment into the future. Military management advise that when fully operational, it will enable induction training to be provided to 900 recruits per annum. That is a significant investment.

We then have the recruitment of cadets and direct entry specialists which will continue in 2024 and is expected to expand as the terms and conditions of a new Air Corps cadetship stream and direct entry officer role are under consideration, as are further increases in age limits for entry. We have increased the limits by which people can join the Army and the Defence Forces.

We brought in specialist external expertise to look at the entire recruitment processes in the Defence Forces to validate them and to advise on recruitment processes. They made significant recommendations. Suffice it to say that change is needed in the recruitment processes and in how we can optimise our spending in the media and in recruitment more generally.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It is encouraging to note that the intake is progressing a bit more favourably this year. I acknowledge that additional funding which the Tánaiste mentioned in the previous budget where I think that €67 million specifically was allocated to address retention issues and that a further €1.5 billion will be allocated over the next five years. With regard to the optimum figure of 11,500 Defence Forces members as a standing service of overall numbers, I believe the Tánaiste said here previously that to achieve that would be very challenging. On the projections the Minister is receiving from his officials, how quickly will the Department meet the target of 11,500 acting servicemen and women? He mentioned in his initial response that the Department is consulting external recruitment expertise. Will he elaborate on what that involves? Is it liaising with other defence ministries abroad? What is meant by external expertise?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The level of turnover in the Defence Forces was approximately 10% in 2023. That includes those in training. The military advice is that is not unusual across the globe.

On the specific point, we brought in a specialist company to examine recruitment processes within the Defence Forces, especially the Naval Service, which is critical. What is happening in the Naval Service is not satisfactory. The company has outlined and identified areas for significant improvement in how the Defence Forces recruit and how we can convert more. That has to do with the interval periods between applications and people being brought in for training. The pay rates have been substantially increased. For a starter, pay is now significantly ahead of other similar grades in the public service. We must look at the retirement ages to improve retention and I hope we will have announcements on that front soon. It is important. Then there is raising the age at which people can join. The age limits are historical and do not conform with modern lifespans or the abilities of people at different ages today and we must grasp that nettle.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: On that specific point, the age limit has been increased in other sectors, including the Garda, recently and, therefore, I do not see why the Government would not envisage something like that in future for the Defence Forces.

Coming back to the Minister's point about stabilising figures, which I think he said was his immediate priority last autumn, I do not expect him to have a crystal ball but from dealing with his officials, is there enough capacity at the moment with respect to applications and recruitment that he thinks he has stabilised the numbers we are losing, namely, the 10% he spoke of? We have spoken previously about how challenging the labour market is at the moment and the demand for people who have come from the Defence Forces in other sectors. When will the Minister achieve that stabilisation? Does he have any comment on the working time directive, the kinds of conditions the armed forces are working under and progress on that?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy said it himself at the outset and I think we are seeing trends in the gap between inductions and people retiring narrowing. The first objective is to stabilise that and get to a net increase figure. It is going to take some time before we get back to establishment level, never mind the target of the Commission on the Defence Forces. The service limits for privates, corporals and sergeants have been extended on an interim basis to the end of this year, so we will need a decision shortly on creating a sustained picture and narrative for those currently in the Defence Forces.

We have made very good progress on the organisation of working time directive and a submission has come to me on it. I expect to make decisions to activate that, in the sense of beginning the process of including the Defence Forces under the directive, which has been an objective of mine. My officials have worked hard with the Defence Forces, military management and the representative associations and a considerable degree of agreement has been reached. There is not total agreement on every issue, but progress has certainly been made in this area.

Departmental Reports

53. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to advise what progress has been made to date in respect of the key recommendations set out in the independent review group into the Defence Forces' report of 2023; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2636/24]

Deputy Colm Burke: Will the Tánaiste outline what progress has been made to date on the key recommendations set out in the independent review group, IRG, into the Defence Forces' report of 2023? Will he make statement on the matter?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. The report of the IRG established to examine dignity and equality issues in the Defence Forces was published following Government approval on 28 March 2023. The Government agreed to progress the recommendations contained in the report.

One of the first actions taken was the establishment of an external oversight body, initially on a non-statutory basis, which is a critical element to driving the necessary culture change throughout the Defence Forces and increasing transparency and accountability. Professor Brian MacCraith agreed to chair the body and last July, the Government approved its terms of reference. To date, the external oversight body had met on 17 occasions and last November I received its first written report in what is, from here on, a quarterly reporting cycle.

In a further important development, last month the Government approved the general scheme of the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2023, which includes provisions for the establishment of the external body on a statutory basis. The general scheme has since been published on my Department's website. In July 2023, the Government also approved the text of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Bill 2023. Part 4 of the Bill amends sections 169 and 192 of the Defence Act 1954 in line with a recommendation in the IRG report. These amendments will ensure An Garda Síochána will have sole jurisdiction within the State to investigate alleged sexual offences committed by persons subject to military law. Any subsequent cases will be dealt with by the civil courts. The Bill is progressing through the Dáil and is currently on Report Stage.

On 16 January, the Government approved the terms of reference for a judge-led tribunal of inquiry to examine the effectiveness of the complaints processes in the Defence Forces concerning workplace issues relating to discrimination, bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and sexual misconduct. It will also have the power to investigate the response to complaints made regarding the use of hazardous chemicals within Air Corps' headquarters at Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnell. I am very pleased that Ms Justice Ann Power will chair the tribunal and I express my gratitude, and that of the Government, to her for agreeing to take on this very important task.

Over the coming week, I will move motions seeking the approval of both Houses to formally establish the tribunal and thereby allow its work to get under way as early as possible this year. In a further development last week, I announced the appointment of Mr. Kevin Duffy as the independent chair of the working group that is to be established to develop a complaints process for civilians and civil servants working with the Defence Forces. He brings a wealth of experience. Following discussions with officials in my Department, the Garda Commissioner has established a helpline for victims of sexual assault to report historical or current cases.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister for his reply and the work that has been done to date. However, the report states:

The reported practices appear to have created a lack of trust in leadership. This emerges strongly from the Perceptions and Experiences survey (2022) and the Benchmarking Report (2022) data which show that 50% of survey respondents are either 'very dissatisfied' or

‘somewhat dissatisfied’ with people senior to them.

There are 13 recommendations in chapter 4 of the report that was published and I am wondering how many of them have been carried out to date. The Minister referred to the legislation and some of the recommendations require legislative change. However, with respect to the ones that do not, how many of them have been put in place to ensure members the Defence Forces are satisfied with the job they are in?

Deputy Micheál Martin: A significant number of the recommendations have been followed through on and have been worked on. I did not list them all there. The whole consultation around the establishment of a tribunal has taken an especially lengthy time, and rightly so, because people wanted to consult and get it right and have suggestions made that we have taken on board. We moved very quickly on identifying that justice Bill for ensuring all sexual assault is investigated by An Garda Síochána. We have also taken steps in respect of the treatment of women in the Defence Forces and in respect of a whole range of the recommendations that were made to make the work environment one where dignity is the key principle that is followed.

I can get a list for the Deputy of all the areas we have followed through on. The external oversight body has been established, but now we are going to put it on a legislative footing. We have published that legislation. There is a lot of work going on. Then we produced the strategic overarching framework, which involves both recommendations of the IDG and also the CODF.

Deputy Colm Burke: If a survey was done in the morning on the issue of the restoration of confidence, is the Minister satisfied we have made enough progress? I fully accept the action taken on this report goes back only to March 2023. It is a very short timeframe but to get people into the Defence Forces, we need to make sure they are going into a job that they are not concerned about as regards how they will be treated, particularly female members who are joining. Is the Minister satisfied that we are restoring confidence and that by this time next year, for example, we will have made major progress in that whole area?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy summed it up himself when he said that cultural change takes time.

Deputy Colm Burke: Absolutely.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am not satisfied yet. I think we still have some distance to go but we are making progress on a whole range of fronts. On the pay front, the Government has made significant progress with things like the patrol duty allowance and medical care. While they are not specific to the independent review group, they are important in terms of the overall quality of the work environment within the Defence Forces. We have made a lot of progress on the working time directive, which is equally important in respect of quality of life for people working in the Defence Forces. There are fundamental issues in terms of training and command and control. These are complex issues that were part of the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces that we are now examining. The recommendations will take a lot of resourcing to implement but we are determined to do so. There is an overarching strategic framework, which encompasses the recommendations of both the independent review group and the Commission on the Defence Forces. They all dovetail, ultimately, in terms of having a better place and better prospects for people working in the Defence Forces.

Dáil Éireann
Defence Forces

54. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence for an update on progress in the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2760/24]

56. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the progress he expects in 2024 towards realising level of ambition 2 for the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2698/24]

84. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the actions he is taking to drive forward the cultural transformation of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2599/24]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I ask the Tánaiste for an update on progress in the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 54, 56 and 84 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As Minister, I am deeply committed to the transformation of the Defence Forces into a modern, fit-for-purpose organisation to defend the State and meet the challenges of today and the future. Following the publication of the report of the independent review group on dignity and equality issues in the Defence Forces in March 2023, I set out my priority to develop one strategic framework for the transformation of the Defence Forces in order that it would be fully understandable to everyone.

The strategic framework, which I published in September 2023, brings together into one overarching document the immediate actions to be taken to support the transformation of the Defence Forces. My priority within this transformation is cultural change above all else. The end goal of this cultural change is to ensure that the Defence Forces is an equal opportunities employer, reflective of contemporary Irish society and is providing a safe workplace where self-worth is actively promoted, mutual respect becomes a dominant feature, and all members are treated with dignity in an organisation that continuously evolves to deliver positive change.

The detailed implementation plan for the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, which was published on 21 November last, forms a core element of the overarching strategic framework and achieving this end goal. The publication of the detailed implementation plan is a further important step on this journey and builds on the publication of the commission report itself in February 2022, the high level action plan in July 2022 and the early actions update published in March 2023. This plan sets out an ambitious programme of work to move to level of ambition 2 by 2028 and the significant and fundamental change for the Defence Forces that will be delivered across the commission's recommendations, which span strategic human resources and cultural change; the establishment of new command and control and joint structures; reform and restructuring of services; a revitalisation of the Reserve Defence Force; and the implementation of joint capability development.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): Thank you.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Do I not have more time because there is a number of questions?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): You will get time to respond

but you do not get more than two minutes now as there is only one Deputy here.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Okay, I have to do what I am told.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I acknowledge what the Tánaiste has just said. He also referenced in his previous reply to Deputy Burke the importance of instigating cultural change and the whole issue of restructuring. Of course, that is required but I want to go back to the issue of retention. We were in the unenviable position last year of having to withdraw from a peace-keeping group. Part of the roadmap ahead in the context of this report and the action plan that came from it is that we will be able to honour our commitments to the EU battle group in 2024 and 2025. Is the Tánaiste confident that aim or target can be achieved?

In response to an earlier question I asked on retention, the Tánaiste said he spoke to Defence Forces personnel about improving the conversion rate of those applying to join the Defence Forces. He referenced the age limit increase but are there any other specific steps being taken to improve that conversion rate?

Deputy Micheál Martin: To conclude my initial response, much progress has been achieved since the commission's report was published. The high level action plan identified the recruitment, through an open process, for the new senior-level civilian positions of head of transformation and head of strategic human resources for the Defence Forces as necessary early actions. Appointments have now been made to these positions. A number of the recommendations that have been implemented to date have had a significant impact. We recently announced new changes to the existing Naval Service allowances, as a means of simplifying current structures, by consolidating the daily allowance and the sea-going commitment scheme into one enhanced allowance. This is in line with the Commission on the Defence Forces recommendation to replace existing sea-going allowances with less complex measures. The sea-going commitment scheme was abolished from the end of 2023. Specifically, the current patrol duty allowance paid to Naval Service personnel will be doubled after ten days at sea. This measure has taken effect from 1 January 2024 and will result in the daily rate increasing from €64.67 to €129.24 for an officer, and from €64.27 to €128.54 for an enlisted person, after ten days at sea. In addition to this, healthcare afforded to officer ranks has been extended to enlisted ranks. Secondary healthcare is being provided to all enlisted personnel. Personnel of private 3 star-able seaman rank are now paid the full rate of military service allowance applicable to the rank and the requirement for that cohort to mark time for the first three years at that rank has been removed.

There is a lot more here that I can submit to the House.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: To go back to the action plan again, I understand it is in its infancy in terms of the delivery of the goals that have been set out but I want to focus on one or two specific points. I will concentrate on the naval side of things, which the Tánaiste mentioned in his previous response. I understand that one of the aims of the action plan is to improve security around subsea cabling, for example, in the context of interference there. This will involve procuring submersibles to aid the Naval Service in the protection of undersea cables. Are we any way along in the journey of procuring that specific technology? I know it is early days yet but I ask the Tánaiste to comment on that. I am also interested in the procurement of sonar systems to strengthen our anti-submarine activity off our coast.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have to beef up the capacity of the Defence Forces to de-

velop a comprehensive radar system, to assess the requirements for Ireland in that respect and to procure one. On subsea cables, obviously aerial support is important. There are a number of dimensions to protecting subsea cables, the most critical one being collaboration with other EU member states, the US and other countries. The monitoring is done globally and different countries alert each other when they spot potential third-party actors who may be either monitoring our subsea cables or are in our specialised exclusive economic zones. It was explained to me by a senior military adviser - not in the Irish Army - that this will be a battle of maths in the future. A lot of this will involve the private sector providing far more information in respect of its cables. There are lots of complexities around international maritime law as it applies to data under the sea and a lot of expertise will be required. Therefore, we do need to collaborate with other countries in terms of protecting subsea cables, particularly the transatlantic ones, because of the enormity of the data that flows through them, which affects all of our lives. It is not just about ships alone.

Defence Forces

55. Deputy Matt Carthy asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the current number of Defence Forces members posted to the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF, peacekeeping mission in the Golan Heights; the current timeframe for the withdrawal of the Defence Forces' infantry group from this mission; the number of Defence Forces personnel who will remain posted to this mission thereafter; and if he will consider reviewing the decision to withdraw from this important mission. [2734/24]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I want to return to what is one of the more disappointing developments in the history of the Defence Forces, particularly its contemporary history. This is the decision to withdraw members from the UNDOF peacekeeping mission in the Golan Heights. I would appreciate it if the Tánaiste would outline the current timeframe for the withdrawal of the infantry group from this mission and the number of Defence Forces personnel who will remain posted to the mission thereafter. I again ask whether there will be a reconsideration of the decision to withdraw.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, there will not be. As of 11 January 2024, there are 134 Defence Forces personnel serving with the UNDOF. I got advice at the time I came into office to pull back and consolidate. We may consider additionality in UNIFIL or elsewhere but that depends on current events. We have a commitment to the EU battle group 2024-25. We have been part of the battle groups since 1999-2000. That is something we have committed to under the Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP. It is important for interoperability. We are in UNIFIL with Poland at present. Interoperability is key so the battle groups are important.

Planning for the withdrawal of the current Defence Forces contingent, the 68th Infantry Group, and its replacement, is well advanced, involving the United Nations, the force headquarters, the current Irish contingent and the replacement troop contributing country to ensure a smooth handover that in no way compromises the mission. Notwithstanding the withdrawal of the infantry group, the Defence Forces intend to continue to occupy a small number of staff officer posts at the UNDOF mission headquarters. These numbers have not yet been determined and will depend on the take-up of these posts by those countries contributing troops to the mission.

As I said, there is no plan to review the decision to withdraw from the UNDOF this year.

The replacement troop contributing country has been selected to take over the role of the force reserve company, following the scheduled Irish departure in April this year. That is the position. We must have the flexibility to contribute, pull back in certain areas if we wish, and then redeploy elsewhere. That is normal.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Whatever way the Tánaiste tries to justify this, he should not try to justify it as an example of flexibility. Far from it being a sign of flexibility, this goes to the core of the weakness of the Defence Forces as a result of the actions of successive Governments. I can see it is logical for a Minister to say that “circumstances must” and, in order to fulfil other commitments we have made, we have to withdraw from what is a crucially important UN peacekeeping mission. At the very minimum, however, I would expect an acknowledgement that we are in an incredibly regrettable position.

In response to an earlier question, the Tánaiste mentioned what would happen if there were a peacekeeping mission in the Middle East. There is a peacekeeping mission in the Middle East. There are actually two, but there is one-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am talking about Gaza. The Deputy knows that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----that has a UN mandate and we are withdrawing from that. Does the Tánaiste acknowledge it is a regrettable position that we have to withdraw and that it would be better if we had the capacity, if we are to take his other rationale at face value, to continue operating in this mission? Does he accept that?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy is a great man for distorting what gets said. He knew damn well I was talking about Gaza, yet he just switched it. What I mentioned earlier is there may be a call for an international security force. There may not be but there may be. In all the talks about bringing peace to Gaza and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it has been actively considered that an international security force would be better in Gaza than an Israeli security presence. I am sure the Deputy agrees with that. He asked the question in the context of the triple lock. I made the point that if the triple lock continues, we would need UN Security Council agreement for that. That was the context in which I suggested to the Deputy that if we were asked to contribute to a peacekeeping mission in Gaza, I would not like to depend on the Security Council if there were not unanimity there. I would like to participate, if we could. That was the context, but the Deputy switched around to this question of us wanting to go into the Middle East and then pulling out. I received military advice at the time I came into office to reconsolidate. Yes, we are joining the peace group but we have been doing that. We have withdrawn from a number of areas, although they involve smaller numbers, for different reasons.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I asked the Tánaiste whether he had considered the position we are in. Accepting the Tánaiste’s rationale that we have to do this, I contend it would have been much better had that decision not been made. It is crucially important if for no other reason than just imagining a hypothetical scenario where a peacekeeping mission is going to Gaza. I am sure whichever body was organising it, it would look at the Irish and asking whether they could trust these lads not to pull out. That is what we are doing as regards the peacekeeping mission in the Golan Heights. To do that, and the reason it has taken quite an amount of time from the original decision being made, others need to step up to plate, just as we stood up to the plate when a previous state withdrew.

The point I am making is that this goes to the heart of dichotomies in the Government’s

position. On the one hand, it is saying we need to get rid of the triple lock in order to be able to participate in missions that do not have a UN mandate. The Tánaiste has yet to cite what precisely that is. He cited a hypothetical mission in Gaza-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, I gave you four cases-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----but there is an important mission in the Golan Heights. Does the Tánaiste accept it is important? Does he accept it would be better if Ireland were able to continue participating in it? Those are the questions I have asked.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Again, I gave the Deputy four examples in a recent question. I spoke about the ship and Operation Sophia and so on-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: From 1999. I am talking about today.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): One voice, please.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, it was 2015. I gave the Deputy examples in respect of that. He made a comment that was unacceptable when he said that these lads could not be trusted as they will pull out.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is what we are doing in the Golan Heights.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The United Nations trusts Ireland. As a country, we are one of the most consistent, respected peacekeepers in the world.

Deputy Matt Carthy: And you are withdrawing from one of the more important missions.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Cheap comments of that kind should not be made by the Deputy. He is just in the job, but he should at least have some respect for the country and how we are perceived internationally.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is why I am trying to protect our reputation while you are trying to do it down.

Deputy Micheál Martin: All peacekeeping participation is subject to review. We pulled out of MINUSMA, which concluded in September 2022. We withdrew three Defence Forces personnel from the MONUSCO stabilisation mission in the Congo. The original two-year commitment to that had ended. We withdrew from the UN training mission in Mali. We take decisions on an ongoing basis. We then decide to enter into other missions if we can, some of which were, in the past, EU led or otherwise led. I will not mix up the two jerseys of the triple lock question and this specific issue. There might be a role in the western Balkans.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is a role in the Golan Heights.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marian Harkin): I am repeating myself all night. Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Chair for her indulgence.

Question No. 56 taken with Question No. 54.

Question No. 57 taken with Written Answers.

Defence Forces

58. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will outline the opportunities for the EDA to deepen its supports for the Irish Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2791/24]

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Defence Forces deserve their fair share of EDA support. The EDA's co-operative projects and programmes with member states offer significant opportunities. By participating actively we can enhance our capability and ensure interoperability with our European partners. The EDA's mission is to support and improve EU member states' defence capabilities that align with our needs. I would appreciate an opportunity to explore current provisions within the Defence Forces.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. The EDA was established by a joint action of the Council of the European Union in 2004 "to support the Member States and the Council in their effort to improve ... [the Union's] defence capabilities in the field of crisis management and to sustain the European Security and Defence Policy as it stands now and develops in the future". On 6 July 2004, Government approved Ireland's participation in the framework of the EDA. The primary reason for Ireland's participation in this member state-led and established body is to support the development of Defence Forces' capabilities for peacekeeping and international crisis management operations. Ireland's participation in the agency provides access to research and information on developing and maintaining professional capabilities and research that we cannot self-generate.

Our participation in EDA projects and programmes is underpinned by legislation, namely, the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, which stipulates Government and Dáil approval is required for participation by Ireland in the *ad hoc* projects of the agency. Importantly, it is completely voluntary as to what projects we wish to participate in. Ireland is currently involved in eight projects through the EDA: MARSUR III - maritime surveillance; the EU Satcom Market - joint procurement for satellite communications; ECMAN - a training project on manual neutralisation of IEDs; MSCB - military search capability building; joint procurement of ammunition; joint procurement of CBRN equipment; joint procurement of soldier equipment; and MICNET - the military computer emergency response team operational network.

The White Paper on Defence references that opportunities should continue to be identified to expand Ireland's participation in multinational capability development projects within the framework of the EDA, in support of the Defence Forces' operations capacity and capability. My Department and the Defence Forces are continually assessing the opportunities that exist in the EDA. Most recently, in July last year we joined four EDA projects, three of which were on joint procurement and one on cyber defence. Other projects that we have joined in the past cover capability areas such as counter improvised explosive devices, military search, and maritime surveillance.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Tánaiste for his comprehensive response. It is encouraging to hear that with the support of the EDA, the Defence Forces are enhancing their capability and improving their readiness. This will contribute more effectively to both regional and international security.

I am aware that the EDA chief executive visited Ireland last year and had discussions with the Defence Forces and Department of Defence senior officials on new opportunities. Cer-

tainly, cyber defence, maritime security and medical support are pressing issues in the context of the training and skills development in our Defence Forces. Will the Tánaiste elaborate on some of the projects that are currently live at the minute? Were applications submitted for calls within the European Defence Fund to support these projects and programmes?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have outlined the eight projects that we are currently involved in, and I outlined that we joined four more. I met with the chief executive officer last year when he came to Dublin. We have established a capability development unit, which goes back to Deputy O'Sullivan's question, to deal with the expanded capability of the Defence Forces as per the Commission on Defence Forces. This unit gives us the capacity of structures to develop and expand within our Department. We can focus on what the EDA and other international institutions can offer to support our capability development. It is very much up to us about where we want to utilise the expertise within the European Defence Agency, to get the right equipment, the right weaponry, and to make sure that we have the optimal interoperability with others with whom we might serve on peacekeeping missions.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I have just one comment on participation in joint exercises. Over the past months we have seen a number of drug seizures off the coast, which have been valued at more than €100 million. With Ireland's vast coastline extending to more than 3,000 km, it is not practical for officers within the maritime unit to be able to cover all this area. The possible assistance of the EDA to strengthen our coastal security measures on the Irish coast, be it through EU co-operation and participation in both the joint military exercises facilitated by the agency, could improve our interoperability and also ensure that we do not become a back-door smuggling route into the EU given the vast waters we have. There is an issue of constraints around our own patrol ships at sea with just two Naval Service ships and this may be an opportunity that could be explored into the future.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The EDA is more a procurement agency to assist us in procuring equipment, weaponry and so forth. Perhaps the Deputy is referring to the PESCO projects, which is a separate initiative. We are currently participating in four PESCO projects: upgraded maritime surveillance; deployable military disaster relief capability packages; maritime autonomous systems for mine countermeasures; and a cyber threats and incident response information-sharing platform. We are observer status on a further 20 projects. I can supply the full list.

Drug interdiction is all about intelligence, collaboration and agencies working together nationally and internationally. There is success there. I visited in Colombia recently. We have a superintendent garda out there in our embassy working with Colombian police forces in sharing of intelligence around narcotics and drug trafficking. That type of exchange of information is key to tracking the shipments, being in a position to know where they are going, and intercepting when most appropriate.

Ukraine War

59. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence further to Parliamentary Question No. 65 of 21 November 2023, the total military aid given by the EU to Ukraine since February 2022, and the details of the contribution given by Ireland to date; the details of the contribution given by Ireland towards common costs of the EU military assistance mission in support of Ukraine; the details of any contributions or donations made by the Defence Forces to Ukraine to date since February 2022, and any contributions or donations

planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2755/24]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am just trying to keep up to date with the amount that we are giving to Ukraine one way or another. What is the total military aid given by the EU to Ukraine since February 2022? Will the Tánaiste give us the details of the contributions given by Ireland to date, the details of the contribution given by Ireland towards the common costs of the EU military assistance mission in support of the Ukraine, and the detail of any contributions or donations made by the Defence Forces here?

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is important to reiterate that Ireland and the European Union have been consistent in their support for Ukraine in the face of Russia's illegal and unjustified war of aggression. The response by the Union to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been unprecedented in its unity, firmness and determination. It has encompassed political, financial, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support for Ukraine. Member states have agreed approximately €5.6 billion in military assistance to Ukraine under the European Peace Facility, EPF, to date, consisting of approximately €5.22 billion for lethal equipment and approximately €380 million for non-lethal equipment.

In line with the programme for Government, Ireland constructively abstains in all lethal equipment elements of the support packages. Our full share of funding - approximately €122 million to date - is therefore directed exclusively towards non-lethal support. This is the basis on which Ireland's involvement in the EPF was decided by the Government, and agreed with and understood by our European Union partners. In addition, Ireland's contribution towards the common costs of the EU military assistance mission in support of Ukraine, EUMAM Ukraine, totals €4.16 million to date. Further contributions by Ireland are likely this calendar year.

Through their participation in EUMAM Ukraine, the Defence Forces have provided: two modules of training to the Ukrainian armed forces in de-mining and clearance, which were conducted in Cyprus; three modules of tactical combat casualty care and combat lifesaver, which were conducted in Germany; and two modules of drill instructor training in Germany. The Defence Forces have a draft programme of training to be provided up to March of this year, which is subject to regular updating.

The Department of Defence has previously provided approximately 10 tonnes - or 5,000 units - of ready-to-eat meals and 200 units of body armour, which were shipped from Defence Forces stocks to Ukraine. I have also approved the donation by the Defence Forces of two DOK-ING mine clearance systems, mine flails, to the Ukrainian armed forces. Mining is a huge issue now in Ukraine and it is currently foreseen that this donation, as well as training on their use and maintenance, will take place in the near future.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Tánaiste for the reply. I am struck by the forceful nature of the language. I have condemned Russia out of hand for its illegal invasion. In the face of Russia's illegal and unjustified war of aggression, I have never heard the same terminology regarding Israel's attack on the Palestinian people. That is the first thing to note.

The second thing to note is that the Tánaiste is telling me the EPF has given €5.6 billion in military assistance. It is a misnomer to call this a peace facility. Can one imagine if we used even a fraction of that fund to bring peace in the world and to help the war to stop? That war should be stopped by now. That €5.6 billion is hard to place in context. When I look at the fact sheet of EU solidarity with Ukraine on the European Commission website, I am told that €67.7

billion has been given over. This €67.7 billion of course related to humanitarian emergency funding but also to military aid. The Tánaiste has given me the figure of €5.6 billion under the peace facility. What is the total figure out of that €67 billion?

Deputy Micheál Martin: There is a lot of bilateral aid which member states themselves provide jointly. Many EU member states, not us, see the Russian invasion as existential, particularly the Baltic states and Poland. Initially, even German people felt the war posed an existential threat to the security of Germany. This is the context. It is arguable that the support given by many member states has stymied Russia's ambition to take over Ukraine. It was touch and go. When we speak to people in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Moldova they feel they are next if Russia succeeds. It is very much seen in existential terms by many of these countries. Europe is vulnerable from a security perspective. We have made our contribution in line with Government policy.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I believe that war is an existential threat.

Deputy Micheál Martin: So do I.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: What is happening in the Middle East is very threatening but we do not use the same language. We are an independent republic. We are an independent sovereign state and we are neutral. We should use our voice to bring peace in the world. That is what we should be doing. I am desperately trying to see among this large figure of €67.7 billion what it is that Ireland is contributing while we dance on the top of a needle saying we are not providing military support and we are giving non-lethal aid. This is the difficulty for me. Then there is the contrast. Earlier, in the Tánaiste's speech on the motion, he spoke about €2 million or €3 million from us going to the International Court of Justice. That is what we have done for Gaza and the Palestinian people.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Maybe I am wrong-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: You are.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will be the first to say sorry if I am. If the Tánaiste looks at the figures that I am looking at, he will see that €67.7 billion is the figure for EU solidarity with Ukraine.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Ireland is a force for peace in the world. In our motion today we condemned the continued Israeli bombardment of Gaza. I condemned the Hamas attack on 7 October. We are seeking peace and we have called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Ireland is consistent in its approach to these matters. We voted for the Arab resolution at the United Nations seeking an immediate cessation of all violence in Gaza. We have been very consistent. We were one of the first EU member states to come out on our own to state we want a ceasefire. We made it very clear when the Arab resolution came forward. Our commitment to the Palestinians is far greater than €3 million. That was unfair and Deputy Connolly knows it. I have said it, and the Deputy has been in the House on numerous occasions when I have detailed our support to UNRWA, which was approximately €18 million last year in terms of the occupied territories alone. There is also our support of OCHA with additional funding for its work in Palestine. The European Union is the biggest donor to the Palestinians but we need to do more.

Departmental Properties

60. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if the licence issued to the Bere Island Projects Group for access to the Lonehort Battery on Bere Island (details supplied) can be renewed immediately; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2764/24]

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: This issue is more local. It is to ask about a licence that was in place between the Bere Island Projects Group and the Department of Defence for access to the Lonehort Battery on Bere Island. Why was the licence not renewed? When can it be renewed?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. There is a long-standing policy of allowing third-party access to Defence Forces facilities and properties in order to support the local communities and to raise the profile of the Defence Forces. This policy extends to a wide number of groups and activities, including GAA clubs, soccer clubs and numerous community groups throughout the country.

As the Deputy correctly said, there is a long-standing association with the Bere Island Projects Group, stretching back to 2013. This has been an association the Department has been happy to support and, I am advised, remains committed to doing so. The Department entered into a formal licence agreement with the Bere Island Projects Group for the use of Lonehort Battery on Bere Island on two previous occasions. The licence allows the group access to the battery for the purpose of its preservation, associated works and its possible development as a visitor attraction.

An application for a licence renewal from the Bere Island Projects Group for access to Lonehort Battery is being actively processed by the Department. In advance of the legal indentures being finalised, I have instructed the officials to issue a letter of comfort to the organisation confirming that it is intended to renew the licence on the same terms as previously agreed.

Deputy O’Sullivan has been raising this issue with me for quite some time. It is a very good project and I pay tribute to the group for the work it does. I recommend people to pay a visit to Bere Island if the weather improves.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I thank the Tánaiste. That is a great answer and I do not know what to do now with my speaking time. It was such a positive response. It is good news and the sooner it progresses the better. I visited Bere Island recently. The Tánaiste might have seen the headlines about the electricity being cut off on the island for more than 30 hours. The subsea cable connecting the island to the mainland was cut by activity that should not have been happening in the inlet at the time. I went to visit the island because being without power for 30 hours is a dark thing for any island community to go through. We did not just talk about loss of electricity; we spoke about so much else.

The Bere Island Projects Group is a fantastic initiative on the island. It organises tours of the Lonehort Battery, which was built in 1899 and used during the First World War. It is an incredible attraction. It is good news that the licence will be renewed. It means the two tour guides who give full guided tours of the battery can continue to do so. The maintenance side is very important, with community employment and Tús workers and volunteers maintaining the battery. They do jobs such as cutting the grass. It is very important that this operation remain

in place. Perhaps we can touch on funding to turn it into a world-class tourist attraction.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I thank Deputy O’Sullivan. West Cork people are very self-reliant, innovative and enterprising, particularly the people of the Beara Peninsula and Bere Island itself. The Department of Defence administers 91.05 ha of land on Bere Island on behalf of the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform in whom the land is vested. The Department of Defence administers 11-month land lettings on 129 acres on Ardagh Mountain and 12.5 acres at Camp Rerrin for the grazing of sheep, cattle and Dexter cattle. The Department of Defence has a fairly significant presence on Bere Island. I hear what Deputy O’Sullivan is saying. It is a strong community. If, through other Departments and agencies, we can support this initiative, I would be very interested in pursuing it with the Deputy.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I thank the Tánaiste. Since he mentioned other Departments and agencies, there is a great opportunity for the Bere Island community to transform the Lonehort Battery into a world-class visitor attraction to attract people to the island. I am not sure whether the Department of Defence is directly involved in this type of activity with regard to tourist attractions but perhaps something like a long-term lease with Cork County Council could be arranged that would allow access to funding to make it a world-class visitor attraction. I am thinking of places such as Spike Island and Charles Fort in Kinsale. There is potential.

I visited the island and although my next point is certainly not in the remit of the Minister, I will bring it up during my speaking time. Islanders depend on access by boat and having proper pier and slipway infrastructure. The piers and slipways on Bere Island badly need upgrading and improvement. It can only be accessed by ferry. This is a very important point to bring up in Cabinet discussions with relevant Ministers. I hope this is something that can be raised with them.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On the latter point, I am not sure whether the Brexit adjustment reserve funding applied. There was significant ramping up of investment in piers. I will speak to the Minister for agriculture in respect of this specific issue. My Department is open to seeing what we can do long term to facilitate certainty. Spike Island happened and I was involved in it at the time. The county manager asked me whether we could persuade the Department of Justice and the then Minister, Senator McDowell, to release Spike Island to the county council. The county council took it on board and the rest is history. I will examine this matter and discuss it with my colleagues and officials in the Department.

10 o’clock

Question No. 61 taken with Written Answers.

National Security

62. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence what measures are being taken to protect any threat of damage to high-speed cables that traverse the north Atlantic, with Ireland being a major international junction for such cables; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2743/24]

71. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the action or

actions proposed to augment the ability of the Defence Forces here to protect vital subterranean and submarine infrastructure in light of any recent global threats in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2756/24]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: An estimated three quarters of the northern hemisphere's undersea cables pass through Irish waters. We are very much at the crossroads between the EU and North America, with significant traffic over and back along those cables. Will the Tánaiste outline the measures being taken to ensure that they are not interfered with?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 62 and 71 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising this question. As he will be aware, Ireland, like many other countries in Europe, has witnessed a fundamental change in our security environment in the past year, with an increased focus on maritime security and the protection of subsea cables. The security of Ireland's subsea infrastructure is a matter of utmost importance to the Government.

As I informed the House on 22 November during a debate on the consultative forum on international security, it is the Government's intention to develop a maritime security strategy, with the necessary resourcing, accompanying legislation and decision-making systems in place. This strategy will have a particular focus on subsea infrastructure.

Following the attacks on Nordstreams 1 and 2 in October 2022, my colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, sought support from my Department for additional measures that could be put in place to ensure that critical offshore infrastructure, including data cables, was protected. As a result of this, enhanced patrolling of the Irish Sea in the vicinity of priority offshore infrastructure is taking place by a mixture of air and naval platforms.

For the Deputy's awareness, the Naval Service, as the State's principal seagoing agency, is tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. While the main daily tasking of the Naval Service is to provide a fishery protection service in accordance with our obligations as a member state of the EU, it also carries out a number of non-fishery-related tasks in tandem with maritime surveillance. Aerial monitoring and surveillance of the Irish exclusive economic zone is carried out by the Air Corps maritime patrol squadron. Two new C-295 maritime patrol aircraft, equipped with state-of-the-art surveillance and communication equipment, were delivered to the Air Corps in 2023 to replace the existing CASA CN-235 aircraft. Following an intensive period of training and verification, the new aircraft have recently been certified to commence operations.

My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capacity of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained and developed. This is to enable the Defence Forces to carry out the roles assigned by the Government. A great deal of work is under way to ensure that we have the required capabilities, with equipment projects under way. We will make further capital acquisitions shortly in terms of strategic airlift and so forth.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The efforts to get the two new naval vessels and the aircraft and to have them deployed have been helpful, positive and a constructive step. Another step would be to identify what underwater capabilities are needed. I understand that the development of advanced capabilities in that respect is a big job, as it involves getting people trained and acquiring hardware. What measures are being taken to advance our subsea capabilities as a supplement to our other work?

What engagement has the Department had with other organisations, be they the cables' owners or other state bodies, on sharing capabilities and information? Is there such engagement and, if so, will the Tánaiste outline it?

Deputy Micheál Martin: A civil-military working group has been established to progress a project for the enhancement of subsea awareness capabilities, as recommended by the Commission on the Defence Forces and referenced in the detailed implementation plan, which was published last November. That project is under way.

One of the projects under NATO's Partnership for Peace is on maritime security and relates specifically to subsea cables. We have to collaborate with other countries and share information and expertise. It is a complex and high-tech area. The Deputy is correct that private sector companies will have to provide more information. There is maritime law on the ownership of data, data traffic and so on. Additionally, in the EU PESCO projects that we are participating in, we highlight the subsea area, including subsea cables, when it comes to maritime security.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Typically, these cables are privately held by various organisations. Those organisations will obviously have an interest in ensuring the security of the cables. I imagine that they will also have capabilities and be monitoring their cables. Is there a sharing of resources and information in that regard and, if so, how helpful is it? Obviously, there is a State responsibility at play in any of this infrastructure, but I am trying to get an understanding of the link-up between private enterprises – the owners – and the State on ensuring that the cables are secure and not being interfered with.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There is a bit more work to be done on engagement with the private sector on the subsea cable issue. Internationally, there is engagement at EU level. The resilience and protection of critical infrastructure has become a higher priority issue for the EU since the pandemic and Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine. Regarding the new individual tailored programme between NATO and Ireland, that is, the Partnership for Peace, it has been agreed that the Department of Defence will lead cross-government work on managing the new resilience partnership areas. This will complement the Department's cross-government work on the EU's critical entities resilience directive on protecting critical infrastructure and utilities. A number of EU initiatives are focused on the protection of critical offshore infrastructure, including a new critical seabed infrastructure protection project within PESCO, which I referenced earlier.

There is collaboration, but the Deputy is correct, in that collaboration with companies needs to be developed more.

Question No. 63 taken with Written Answers.

Tribunals of Inquiry

64. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if his Department will revisit the terms of reference of the tribunal investigating abuse in the Defence Forces, given the dismay of Women of Honour at the limits of what is proposed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2741/24]

74. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will report on

his engagements with stakeholders regarding the establishment of a tribunal of inquiry arising from abuses allegations brought to public attention by Women of Honour group; the timeframe within which he expects the tribunal to commence its work and complete its final report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2732/24]

76. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will comment on the terms of reference of the statutory inquiry into the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2794/24]

78. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence further to Parliamentary Question No. 78 of 21 November 2023, the status of the tribunal of inquiry to examine the effectiveness of the complaints process in the Defence Forces; the timeline for same; to clarify if the tribunal will examine allegations of abuse in respect of which formal complaints were not made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2754/24]

85. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he met with the Women of Honour group before the terms of reference for the tribunal of inquiry into the Defence Forces handling of bullying, harassment and sexual assault allegations were agreed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2780/24]

93. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence his response to concerns expressed that the proposed tribunal of inquiry into abuse in the Defence Forces “comes across as a paper exercise”; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2766/24]

Deputy Réada Cronin: Will the Department of Defence revisit the terms of reference of the tribunal investigating abuse in the Defence Forces, given the dismay of Women of Honour at the limits of what is proposed, and will the Tánaiste make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 64, 74, 76, 78, 85 and 93 together. I believe we addressed this matter in an earlier question.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Sort of, but not quite.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The draft terms of reference were prepared. There was a significant number of meetings between Women of Honour, me and the Attorney General. In the earlier question, I listed the amendments that we had taken on board as a result of those meetings with Women of Honour. I would make the point that we agreed on a range of issues. If the Deputy wishes, I will list them again.

That the statutory inquiry would be by way of public inquiry was Women of Honour’s first big request. We discussed the pros and cons and agreed to it. We accepted an amendment on the addition of physical torture, physical assault and psychological harm and the definition of “abuse”, and these are now in the terms of reference. Another amendment involved the inclusion of the Protected Disclosures Acts, 2014 and 2022, and the definition of “complaints processes”. The investigation of whether complaints were actively deterred was sought, and I believe that was fair. Whether there was a culture that discouraged the making of complaints is in the terms of reference. The provision of safeguards for serving members who give evidence to the tribunal is included, as is the provision of a waiver in respect of non-disclosure agreements. The tribunal may permit evidence of abuse and the consequences of abuse to be heard and there is provision for an investigation of the response to the use of hazardous chemicals within the Air Corps headquarters. Also, the draft terms of reference were expanded following consulta-

tion with stakeholders, especially with the Women of Honour group, to include investigations of whether complaints of abuse were actively deterred or if there was a culture that discouraged the making of complaints. This will allow the tribunal, and this concerns the Deputy's earlier point about incidents, to investigate allegations where an individual claims they did not pursue their complaint through the process due to, for example, their fears of repercussions.

There was a fear that if a complaint had not been made that this would mean someone could not go before the tribunal. This has been dealt with and it is in the terms of reference. The chair, the judge, is absolutely clear that all cases that come before the tribunal will be heard. Obviously, though, the tribunal cannot make findings in relation to criminal matters that are before the courts.

Deputy Réada Cronin: We are all anxious that the tribunal does its work and it goes well for the Women of Honour and, indeed, the people we met this morning in the audiovisual room. There are, though, three things we must keep to the front of our minds here because if we do not, then we will be lost before we start. One is that there is a great power imbalance between the Defence Forces as an organisation and the individual personnel within it. It is also a hierarchical and patriarchal culture, in which the outlined sexual and other abuses were committed. The third point is the powerlessness of the people who were abused in a society within a society. It has its own rules, its own discipline, its own courts and its own police. Of course, regarding the people being dealt with, it is not just a question of a different rank. The people being dealt with are armed. They have their own courts. These are things we must keep to the front of mind in respect of the terms of reference and the business of the tribunal.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Réada Cronin: How does it go when questions are grouped?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is Deputy Wynne who is next and then-----

Deputy Réada Cronin: Okay.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are running out of time. I call Deputy Wynne.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Right. I was just not sure about the procedure when the questions are grouped like this.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: Go raibh maith agat. As the Minister is aware, there was a briefing in the audiovisual room today and the information we heard was quite harrowing, not only from the Women of Honour but from the other groups as well. They mentioned respect, loyalty, selflessness, physical courage, moral courage and integrity. Those are the six values that the Defence Forces state are fundamental. They are the ethos of the Defence Forces. These values are the very reason many chose a career in the Defence Forces. Unfortunately, they were let down and failed and they are coping with that fact daily.

To choose the military is not an easy option. It is not for everyone and it is a choice that comes from a place of great pride in your country and a call to defend your people. The Minister needs to bear in mind that these are formidable individuals. They will not be deterred nor will they give up. They have been loud and unequivocally clear that the terms of reference do exclude victims of abuse. We know full well that the complaints process has been deficient, and we have known this from as far back as 1990. Perhaps the Minister can provide a bit of

clarification because it is my understanding that those who did not engage with the complaints process will not be included in the inquiry.

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, they will be.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are actually out of time. I will just let this item conclude. I will allow the Tánaiste in for a very brief comment.

Deputy Micheál Martin: People who did not make a complaint during their lives in the military for fear of suffering reprisal-----

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----or were deterred by intimidation will be allowed to go before the tribunal and make their case because it is important that they will be able to go before the tribunal so that-----

Deputy Réada Cronin: Does that depend on the judge's opinion?

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, it does not depend on that. This is in the terms of reference.

Deputy Réada Cronin: This was not what was explained to us.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I know, please-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is in the terms of reference.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: Right.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This was made clear to the members of the Women of Honour group as well. It is in the terms of reference.

Deputy Réada Cronin: That was not their interpretation of it.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: Yes, there has been a breakdown in communication because-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have listed out three times today now that we specifically included and facilitated any people who felt they could not make a complaint because they were deterred from doing so or were afraid there would be reprisals. All those cases are not excluded. I do not know how that has emerged. The Attorney General met with the Women of Honour group with me and went through all of this. The only issue at the end that I could think of, because I listed out all the issues, and the Deputy probably heard me there listing the cases, was around the random selection issue in a context where we had, say, thousands of cases. This matter goes back 40 years, so there is a safeguard in there to ensure we can finish the process within a reasonable timeframe.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: Will that be-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The judge, however, has made it clear that, and this relates to workplace incidents and everything, in terms of-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste. I have stretched the time as far as I can.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The idea of random selection had come from the legal representative of the Women of Honour group in the first instance.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Anybody who made a complaint and was unhappy with how that complaint was treated or anybody who did not make a complaint but who was abused can come before the tribunal.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are out of time. We are four minutes over.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Maybe we will get the terms of reference.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Okay. Earlier, it was said there was a lack of communication or, certainly, that the communication was poor between the Minister's Department and the stakeholders.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. I have given as much flexibility as I can. I am really sorry.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I know. We will be discussing it anyway, so I suppose we will get a bit more clarity in that context.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Yes, this matter is on tomorrow.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat. That concludes questions to the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence.

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Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Tax Code

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, for taking this really important Topical Issue matter. The next few weeks and months are crunch time for Ireland's hospitality sector. I do not think there is any doubt about this. We have some very important decisions to make as a Government. We can make decisions that will allow Ireland's hospitality sector to flourish or we can make decisions that will see a continuation of the trends that have seen the closure of hospitality businesses such as cafes and restaurants and the whole sector struggling.

For me, the decision we have to make is very clear. The VAT rate now for hospitality busi-

nesses is 13.5%. We need to split that VAT within the sector. Let the accommodation continue at 13.5%. It is okay and can cope with this level. For those food-led businesses and the food-led industry, though, we have to reduce the VAT rate back to where it was before the budget, at 9%. When I talk about food-led businesses, I am talking about cafes and restaurants and those small, family-run hotels that deal almost primarily in food in some instances. I refer as well to the gastropubs. These are the businesses that are the heart of our towns and villages. These are the cafes and restaurants that create the buzz and vibrancy on our main streets. They are run by our friends, neighbours and by family members. If we see this sector struggle and go down the Swanee, then it will be our towns and villages and our communities that will struggle. This is an important point to make.

The thing about this is that many of these businesses are not struggling to fill tables, to fill seats or to get customers in through the door. They are vibrant, have a good product and are serving up really good food, but they cannot make ends meet and cannot make profits. A Government cannot control everything. There is very little we can do, for example, about the cost of ingredients. I refer to the cost of carrots, onions or of a tub of mayonnaise, these important ingredients that this sector uses. There is very little we can do about the escalating cost of energy, for example. There are, however, things we can help with, such as rates. The big lever we can pull, though, is the VAT rate and to reduce it to 9%. This is the single biggest intervention we can make to ensure this sector remains viable and alive.

Some 67% of jobs in rural Ireland are supported by hospitality. That is staggering. It is the biggest indigenous employer. We cannot stand by and see this incredibly important sector, that we are all so passionate about, eroded. I speak to business owners every day. They are anxious. Many have sleepless nights. I am talking about some of the most successful businesses in my region but the owners are losing sleep because of this issue. We have to intervene and reduce the VAT rate for food-led businesses back to 9% to just give them a chance.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank the Deputy. I know how important this issue is generally and in his constituency. I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath.

At the outset, the Deputy should note that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law, with which Irish VAT law must comply. In general, the EU VAT directive provides that all goods and services are liable to VAT at the standard rate, which is 23% in Ireland, unless they fall within categories of goods and services specified in Annex III of the VAT directive, in respect of which member states may apply a lower rate of VAT. Tourism and hospitality fall within Annex III, thus explaining why they have been subject to these lower rates for a considerable period. The lower VAT rates that apply in this country are 13.5% and 9%.

As the Deputy will be aware, the 9% VAT rate applied on a temporary basis to the hospitality and tourism sectors until 31 August 2023, when it reverted to the 13.5% rate. The 9% rate was introduced on 1 November 2020 in recognition of the fact that the tourism and hospitality sectors were among those most impacted by the public health restrictions put in place throughout the pandemic. Through no fault of their own, bars, hotels and restaurants had to close on multiple occasions in response to the public health crisis.

The economic rationale for a VAT rate reduction at that time, as it was in 2011 when the rate was also reduced to 9%, was to lower consumer prices, thereby encouraging higher demand,

more output and an increase in employment. However, it is important to remember that even temporary VAT reductions have a cost to the Exchequer. The estimated cost of the 9% rate for tourism and hospitality from 1 November 2020 to 31 August 2023 was €1.2 billion. This represented a very substantial support from the Government to the hospitality and tourism-related sectors.

As the 9% VAT reduction was considered temporary in nature from the outset, the Department of Finance carried out an economic assessment of it in 2023 to see if there was a case for its continuing application. This assessment considered the macroeconomic backdrop to any extension of the 9% rate, noting that the economy had rebounded strongly from the pandemic and that economic activity was above pre-pandemic levels. The briefing also noted that the reduced rate was both regressive and costly and that this cost represented a transfer from taxpayers to the sector. The Government accepted this economic assessment but, instead of ceasing the 9% rate on 1 March of last year, extended it to 31 August 2023 at an estimated cost of €300 million to strike what it considered an appropriate balance between the cost to public finances and the provision of support for these sectors.

I note the Deputy is specifically seeking that the reduction in the 9% VAT rate would only apply to food items in the hospitality sector. In this regard, Revenue has previously advised that such a separation from accommodation for VAT purposes is possible. However, it has also indicated that there are practical operational concerns in having different VAT rates applying to hotel accommodation and meals given how the sector operates, with various packages ranging from bed and breakfast accommodation through to all-inclusive board and lodging packages.

In addition, a significant concern the Minister for Finance has with this proposal is that the cost from an Exchequer perspective would still be very significant. Food makes up a far greater proportion of overall tourism and hospitality VAT revenue than accommodation. For instance, were the 9% rate to be applied to food for 2024, the estimated cost would be €570 million. Consequently, the Minister for Finance is not in a position to apply a 9% VAT rate to food items in the hospitality sector.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I am obviously utterly disappointed at the response and at the refusal to even examine this proposal further. There is mention of a cost of €570 million to the Exchequer. That is obviously not to be ignored. We cannot pretend it is a small figure. It is a lot; it is €570 million. However, the cost to our communities, to society and to our tourism regions of losing cafes, restaurants and gastropubs on the main streets of our towns and villages is far greater. We know the economy is doing well and that we are at almost zero unemployment but there are other aspects to the economy in different regions that we cannot ignore. While there is a cost of €570 million, I will say again that 67% of jobs in rural Ireland are supported by the hospitality sector. It is the single biggest indigenous employer. I do not see that anywhere in the report or the assessment. I want to see a proper assessment of what this would mean to hospitality businesses, cafes, restaurants, gastropubs and hotels. That is what I want to see rather than a simple figure.

Back in March 2023, I flagged with the Taoiseach that there was a tidal wave coming down the line for the hospitality sector. We cannot help with some of the costs. Auto-enrolment and the increase in the minimum wage had to happen and we are not going to row back on them. There is no way we are going to row back on increased sick leave. The one thing we can fix is the VAT rate. I want to see it examined again. I am not going to give up in my quest to have this sorted. The administrative issues Revenue talks about are a load of baloney. This can happen.

It happens in other countries. A rate of 13.5% on hospitality is far greater than the European average. This has to be revisited. I am not accepting the “No” I am getting as an answer today.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate Deputy O’Sullivan raising this issue and his contributions today. We all know the real importance of the hospitality sector, which is, as the Deputy has stated, a very significant employer across the country, in our cities and towns, as well as in many rural communities. It is a sector where job opportunities exist, ranging from part-time to full-time roles. I am also conscious that it can be a challenging sector to operate within.

The Government obviously wants to maintain a healthy and profitable environment for the sector but, in making any decision on VAT or other taxation measures, the Government must balance the cost of the measures in question with their impact on the overall budgetary framework. I will refer to an initiative of the Minister for Finance, Deputy McGrath. On 17 January, he announced that he has been engaging with the Revenue Commissioners on the development of a proposal to introduce further flexibility to the tax debt warehousing scheme. Further information will be outlined soon but it is the Minister’s intention to introduce enhanced flexibility to support viable businesses. To this end, he advised that the Government was looking at issues around repayment arrangements and the interest rate that will apply. Revenue has indicated that it will be flexible as regards payment plans for warehoused debt and will work with businesses in the scheme so that they can secure their viability into the future.

As I have already indicated, the cost of applying the 9% rate to food items in the hospitality sector would amount to €570 million in a full year and €470 million from 1 March of this year to the end of the year. Such a decision would have significant consequences, as it would provide support for some businesses and not others while further limiting the Government’s options in the future by reducing the overall budget available for other measures. I will reflect the Deputy’s contribution on this Topical Issue to the Minister, Deputy McGrath.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Táimid ag bogadh ar aghaidh go dtí an dara ceist, atá in ainm an Teachta Matt Carthy, who seeks to discuss services for children with disabilities in Cavan and Monaghan.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am sorry. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is coming. Would the Deputy like to wait?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is Deputy Chambers taking the third Topical Issue?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Yes, but Deputy Rabbitte is coming.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am happy to swap.

Flood Relief Schemes

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Ceann Comhairle’s office for choosing this Topical Issue this evening and I thank the Minister of State for being here. It is now over three months since Storm Babet, which devastated my part of the country, Cork, and Midleton in particular. The images from the town on the television screen were really frightening. There was water 3 ft or 4 ft high in houses, homes and businesses and cars and roads were destroyed. I acknowledge the Minister of State visited and saw for himself the damage that was done. For many years now, we have been promised a flood relief scheme not only for Midleton, but also for

Castlemartyr and Mogeely, which is to the east of Midleton. Those areas were also impacted. In fact, of the 32 houses in one estate in Mogeely, 30 were destroyed. Everything people had in those new houses was destroyed. There was millions of euro in damage. Not alone that, there was also the heartache, pressure and trouble experienced by those affected.

I know the Minister of State has a prepared script. What has been done since Storm Babet hit on 18 October? Tonight, Storm Jocelyn is battering the country. At the weekend, there was another storm. There are 21 storms in this season. We are now on storm No. 10. They are coming thick and fast, like rosary beads, one after another across the Atlantic. When Storm Isha was hitting us at the weekend I was worried there would be another flood in Midleton. Another downpour is all it will take. We need to expedite the flood defences. What has happened in the past three months in that regard? I have been raising this consistently with my colleagues since that time. I was told a few weeks ago that there is a plan to divert the River Kiltha in Castlemartyr, for instance. What is happening in that regard? There were possible interim plans. What is happening with that? What will happen in Mogeely? I know the major scheme in Midleton town is very complicated and there is a €50 million package available to spend. What is the status of that scheme? What is happening with the planning permission? I understand the plans are ready and a significant amount of work has been done. It now has to go to planning. What route will that take? Will it go the conventional route or the river catchment route?

These are questions people are asking. They are concerned about it. The constant topic of conversation around the town and in the area is what will happen and whether there will be another flood. An elderly man with a disability was taken out of his house in the shovel of a JCB. He told me that every time he hears the rain he is afraid of his life that it will happen again. He does not want to go back to the house.

The situation is beyond urgent at this stage. I know there are two rivers coming into Midleton town, the tide coming in, the caves and the run-off from the land. We were all aghast at the flooding. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and many Ministers, including the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, came down to east Cork in the few days after the flooding but my experience through the many years is that once something has been seen, dealt with and highlighted, it then fades away. I do not want this issue to fade away. I am afraid it will happen again.

We were very lucky that there were no fatalities the last time. Some people were washed down the street. One woman came out of a shop and her feet were taken out from under her, such was the pressure of the water, and she was washed down the street. Another man was in his garden. The wall at the back of the garden collapsed with the force of water. The same happened in one of the housing estates. Walls were blown away by the force of the water. It was unimaginable. At least two bridges I know of need to be replaced. The Minister of State has seen those bridges and some of the roads affected. I understand Cork County Council is in discussion with his Department, namely, the Department of Transport, for roads funding. When will that funding be released? When will we have certainty in that regard? If the Minister of State cannot answer that now, perhaps he will send me a note on it in the next day or two.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Having visited Midleton following the flooding from Storm Babet, I have seen at first hand the devastating impact flooding has for home owners, businesses and the wider community.

The catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme provided the Government with the evidence to launch a national and proactive programme of 120 additional

and new flood relief schemes in 2018. While Midleton was part of this programme, major flooding in December 2015 and again in January 2016 were the catalysts to commence work for the design of a flood relief scheme for Midleton ahead of the conclusion of the CFRAM programme. Cork County Council is leading the design of the scheme and in 2017 appointed engineering and environmental consultants. Designing any flood relief scheme is complex and requires data on the flood sources and their associated risks. Today, some 100 schemes are at design and construction stages.

Midleton has proven to be a more complex scheme. It has flood risks from four sources, namely, fluvial, tidal, groundwater and pluvial. In 2017, data did not exist on all sources and monitoring was required to allow the flooding mechanism to be fully understood. The data gathering and changing regulatory requirements, including environmental assessments, increased the scale and scope of the design project. Throughout this time, three public participation days were held, in 2017, 2020 and 2022. As well as engaging with the local community on the scheme's progress, these served to gather useful information and assess their views on the emerging option and, more recently, the preferred option for the Midleton flood relief scheme. The outcome also increased the scope of the analysis and assessments required.

The preferred scheme has now been identified, with a total project budget of €50 million, three times that estimated in 2017. This highlights the scale of the project's increase in scope. It also highlights that we have designed a scheme that is robust and supported by strong evidence. It has the support of the community and is future proofed and adaptable to climate change scenarios. The preferred option protects 580 properties against the one in 100 year flood fluvial event, can give back flood insurance to the town and stands up to scrutiny and-or challenge.

Having invested eight years in arriving at a preferred scheme, an assessment following Storm Babet is under way, in order that we know we have a scheme that can meet the standard of protection required by the insurance industry. The next major step is to seek planning consent. Work has already begun on the environmental surveys to allow us to start the planning consent process early this year.

After Storm Babet, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, and his officials met with the chief executive and senior officials from Cork County Council and the scheme's consultants to discuss how the Midleton scheme can be delivered as quickly as possible. While the planning stage for this project is due to commence shortly, Cork County Council is assessing Storm Babet to identify the possibility of advancing any viable interim and targeted works for the town. Identification and ongoing roll-out of interim measures has also been progressed, including the removal of trees in channel at Moore's Bridge and installation of a water level gauge at Tir Cluain bridge, with additional gauges to be installed at Lidl bridge and the pedestrian bridge in People's Park in January 2024.

East Cork bore some of the worst impacts from this flooding. In Midleton, the Owenacurra river rose at an unprecedented rate and broke its banks at two locations, causing significant flood damage to the town, with more than 100 properties flooded. At its peak, the main street in Midleton saw floodwaters in excess of 1 m depth, requiring the evacuation of dwellings and commercial properties. People displaced by the floodwaters were given shelter.

The OPW and local authorities do not have the powers to expedite the schemes arising from the damage caused by flooding events. The delivery of all schemes must meet all regulatory and planning requirements. Consideration is being given to the preferred planning route that

can deliver this scheme as quickly as possible.

In terms of the wider flood risk management scheme, there is a prioritised approach to deliver schemes where work is complete or under way. Under the OPW minor flood mitigation works and coastal protection scheme, applications by local authorities for localised flood mitigation measures are considered for projects that are estimated at a variety of costs, as was outlined to the Deputy previously by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister of State. As he said, this all started in December 2015, eight years ago. That is a long time ago. Is he satisfied the OPW and the council have enough resources to carry on with the work and the planning and move it on? Do they need more manpower, expertise, engineers or planners to move this forward? He referred to insurance on several occasions. Several of the businesses in question were underinsured, unfortunately. I thank the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Red Cross for the work they did with businesses. Some businesses never expected the level of devastation that occurred. No one could have expected it. It was unprecedented. I have been in the shops, houses and businesses affected. It is devastating to see what happened. Some people were insured to a certain level but it went way beyond that. Can the State come in and help those businesses to make up the difference? Thus far, the scheme does not allow for that.

In addition, outdoor infrastructure was damaged in some cases. That is not covered either. The Minister of State referred to this being a one in 100 year event.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The fluvial event was a one in 100 year event.

Deputy David Stanton: I would be very interested to know where that figure came from. Who came up with it? We have had flooding in 2015, 2018 and 2023. I am worried there might be another flood. I do not want to be wandering around the town in my wellingtons, helping people and pulling sandbags. I am getting too old for that. To be serious, this is devastating for the people affected.

The Minister of State referred to insurance. I wish to put on record that some insurance companies have been slow to come forward. I will shortly name those insurance companies in the House if they do not come forward. It is not fair that people whose homes are insured are still waiting for relief, help, support and payments from insurance companies. The companies should be moving to help but some of them are not doing so.

Reference was made to Moore's Bridge. It is a private bridge. We want funding for it. The same applies to Water Rock bridge, which needs doing, and major work is needed in Mogeely and Castlemartyr.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Cork County Council is working closely with the community during the remaining delivery of this important scheme. In the briefing provided by the OPW and the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, they speak about different types of flood event. I think they reference one particular event having that time period. I take the Deputy's point on the greater frequency that is being seen there. I am not sure what the specific definition of those flood events was. I understand the importance of bringing security and certainty for the wider community who live in fear of the next storm and the next event. There is an obligation on the State and the wider structures of the State to respond properly and with sincerity to make progress in the interests of the communities the Deputy represents and address the concerns he has articulated. I take that point very seriously.

Two meetings have been scheduled recently between the steering group for the scheme and locally elected representatives, businesses and residents. One took place in November of last year and the other is scheduled for this month. The Government is committed to the delivery of a flood relief scheme for Midleton and this will be funded from the €1.3 billion that is available for flood risk management measures under the national development plan. I will raise the wider concerns and points the Deputy has made and the need for absolute focus on delivery and progress on this matter for the people in Midleton.

Regarding the roads, which have been atrociously damaged, I know, there is extensive work ongoing between Cork County Council and the Department of Transport on putting the final estimate together. We will be responding properly so that there are full repairs and restoration of the road network, both local and regional, that was very badly affected during that period and will try to make significant progress on that this year. There is extensive engagement ongoing on that.

Disability Services

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have been raising issues of the lack of services for children with disabilities in County Monaghan since I was elected to this House and, in fact, beforehand. Disability services over my county are sorely lacking. Even the service elected representatives receive is often lacking as well.

There are two issues that I have raised with the Minister of State consistently that I want to put on the record of this House again. The first is in respect of respite services for children with disabilities in County Monaghan, which do not exist. Children in the county have to go onto the waiting list for the services in County Cavan, which themselves only operate every second week for children. The latest figures I have indicate that 33 children receive respite care in Cavan, all of whom are seeking additional hours that they need. There are a further 57 children on waiting lists for respite services and I know of others who have not even applied because they know the service is not available even though it is needed.

Second, there is a need for a special school in County Monaghan. There is a special school in County Cavan but again, there are children in County Monaghan, and I am sure in County Cavan as well, who cannot get access to it because it is full. Earlier this week, I heard the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, speaking on the radio about respite services. I want her to spell out precisely what the plan is for respite services. I heard her mention that the HSE is looking for a building to build or buy, or whatever the case may be. Will the Minister of State outline how much is in the budget this year to provide respite services? These are the same disability services that left a brand new building vacant for years in my home town of Carrickmacross after it had been built. There was a lack of forward planning.

Virtually a year ago, on 17 February 2023, I raised one particular tragic case of a family that are in desperate need of respite services. In fairness to the Minister of State, she was very empathetic and sympathetic and agreed there and then to meet the mother involved. This is a mother who has a child with profound additional needs and all sorts of other things going on. In fairness, the Minister of State held that meeting and there was a senior member of the disability services present. She will remember there was an issue in terms of policy with regard to the services in Cavan. After a number of months, that policy was changed. On successive, countless occasions since then, I have interacted through parliamentary questions with both the

Minister of State and the disability services. On 25 September, for example, I got a response from the disability services indicating that, having considered this child's individual needs and in consultation with the child's mother, a plan had been devised to provide day respite hours initially and to gradually increase the duration of the child's visits. The length of these visits would be decided during upcoming meetings with the child's mother and the child. Once they became familiar and comfortable with the respite service at Annalee centre, overnight stays would be introduced. They are essentially blaming the child if they do not get respite care. That was from September 2023. Since then I have made references to the case here in the Dáil. I could not believe it when I spoke to the child's mother at the beginning of this year and she told me that the child still does not have overnight respite. It is a scandal.

I spoke to the Minister of State and, in fairness, she was amenable and answered the call. She told me that within 24 hours, the head of disability services would be in touch with me. I have still not been contacted. How am I supposed to provide representation to a family when we have senior officials that treat elected representatives like that? How can we trust that those officials are treating the families with the respect and dignity they deserve if they are treating us, who have this public platform, in this way? That mother was forced to go onto "Liveline" and local radio to outline the family's case. I ask the Minister of State to tell me when that child is going to have overnight respite care.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Deputy for tabling this Topical Issue matter this evening and giving me the opportunity to discuss it on the floor of the Dáil. He quite rightly outlined that he has raised this specific case with me over the last 12 months. Not only that but he and his colleagues in Cavan-Monaghan have continuously raised the issue of the lack of respite services in County Monaghan and the fact that children have to leave the county and share the service on a week on, week off basis with the neighbouring county, with adults one week and children another week.

My script does not reflect what the Deputy has outlined. When the matter was tabled it referred to children's services and the officials automatically assumed that meant everything to do with children's disability network teams, CDNTs. There is no word of respite in the statement I have. I can answer the Deputy's question, however, because I understand it and have been involved in the matter, which relates to the lack of services in an area where children have to leave and share services on a week on, week off basis. I have raised that with disability services. The way community healthcare organisation, CHO, 1 is divided out, we have Donegal, Sligo-Leitrim and Cavan-Monaghan. That is how the area has always been looked at. It has never been looked at on a county-by-county basis or within the old catchment areas. The Deputy quite rightly said that children have to leave the county and that there are not sufficient or adequate services for them.

The Deputy's first and very clear question was what money I have in the purse. I have enough money in the purse to fund a seven over seven, which is a four- or five-bedroom house that can accommodate four or five children and is compatible, on a seven-night basis, for staffing. It would not be fair for me to indicate the amount of funding I have but it is enough to do that. That equates to approximately 75 children who can be facilitated. I said yesterday on a radio show that the way this needs to be done is through two front doors - a front door for children who have a mild to moderate disability, are compatible and can be with each other. Children who have sensory needs cannot share that space. We do not want a scenario where the service does not function for everybody else. That is where the second front door can operate. I have seen the two front door model used successfully and continuously in Council Clare, for

example.

Edel has made a submission to the national office that it go through HSE estates. I am reluctant to deal with HSE estates, to be honest, because the process takes so long. If there was a section 39 provider already providing services in the area, it would be the ideal candidate to say it is able to provide or open to providing the service. It could purchase a property quicker than going through HSE estates. I am not being alarmist, but that process can take four years. If you purchase a particular house through a section 39 organisation, it can be operationalised very quickly because it will recruit the staff. It is also important to say that there is not an embargo on staffing in disability services. We are slow at the moment in getting that message out there, but there is not an embargo. There is funding available for the Deputy's county. That has been totally laid bare. I wrote down the names of all the people I have met at this stage. I have met Senators Diarmuid Wilson, Robbie Gallagher and Joe O'Reilly, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, and Deputies Matt Carthy, Niamh Smyth and Brendan Smith. I have met every one of them, and every one of them outlined the need for it, so this is not wasted. As for the lady I met in my office, I can only but apologise for the fact that she is only getting what I would call introductory hours. The reason we use that sort of language is that if a child does not transition comfortably, then they might not want or be able to put their head on a pillow at night. It is unfortunate that it has taken six months for that to progress, to be honest.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is even longer than six months.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I know that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: This particular case is just unacceptable, and heads need to be smacked together. We raised the issue in February and I think it was March when we had the meeting. It took a number of months to get them to change an archaic policy which was unique in respect of the fact that this child was being denied services essentially because of a word on a page. In between times, nothing was being done in terms of even preparing for that. Then the policy was changed. The response I read to the Minister of State is from September. We are now at the end of January 2024. I cannot remember the first time I raised this young man's case in parliamentary questions, but it has to be verging on two years ago at this stage. Therefore, it is important we say that it is not a way to treat human beings, and especially children with disabilities and their families who are at their wits' end.

To be quite frank, if the service in Cavan was good enough there probably would not be the strong demand that there rightfully is in terms of looking for the service in Monaghan. The Cavan service is not good enough. The reason we know that is that everybody who is availing of it needs more hours. There are adults and young adults who cannot get respite because they are basically sharing the alternative weeks. It is not good enough and it is not acceptable. I will not be accepting it anymore. We cannot have the situation continue where we are dealing with parents and running round the houses. Officials are saying they will sort it out when the Minister of State is in the room, and then they do not sort it out.

I ask the Minister of State to comment on the demand for a special school in Monaghan, because clearly there is a demand there for that as well. They are the two demands that are raised with me all the time. I want to raise this particular issue and I ask for the Minister of State's assurance that the child in question is going to be sorted out with overnight respite hours quickly.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The Deputy is quite right to say that when we sort out the chil-

dren's services, there will be adequate services for the adults or the younger adults. One house will be left for adult respite services and we will have a children's respite facility. The capital plan is being launched in the next two or three weeks. Cavan is in the capital plan because of the advocacy that has gone on. We will await its publication to see that through.

On special schools, the Deputy knows as well as I do that I do not have the remit for special schools at all. However, I would advocate that there is a serious need for a special school in the area. That was borne out by the health officials who met with us that day. They were clearly able to tell us that there was such a demand to access special schools, and that children were travelling unbelievable distances on buses to access services. To be honest, it is little wonder that Carrickmacross-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is Castleblayney.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: ----or Castleblayney provides phenomenal after-school services. They have been part and parcel of where the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has looked in expanding the access and inclusion model. They are also the reason we have included the alternative respite piece in the budget, whereby children can be facilitated after school as opposed to having to do an overnight. We have that in Castleblayney. They are models and we need to have a suite of measures available when it comes to respite. Children need to be supported outside of term time. They need to be supported in the evenings and in Saturday clubs. That is the whole package for families to feel supported. I will speak to Edel to make sure she speaks to the Deputy.

Hospital Overcrowding

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I want to put on the record that I am disappointed the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is not here. I understand he sent me an email to say he would not be here, but I would expect somebody from the Department of Health to have been available. I have raised this concern on a number of occasions but at least this time I was told that nobody was coming. It is indicative of the Minister. He is dodging the discussion. In a previous Dáil I had years of conversation with the previous Minister, Deputy Harris, about not turning up for these discussions and debates.

I have been raising the issue of University Hospital Limerick in the Chamber since I was elected for the first time in 2016, and it has got worse and worse. Last year was the worst year ever, with more than 21,000 people on trolleys. Yesterday was the worst day ever, with 132 people on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick. It is an incredible number of people. We can get carried away sometimes when we are talking about numbers and statistics, but these are all people. They are family and people we know. They are relations, neighbours and friends, who are often in distress. The situation needs to be addressed. There needs to be Government intervention. The Minister of State will read out a script. I have probably heard the same script for the past seven years non-stop. We need Government intervention that will do something in the here and now, because the Minister is out of touch.

On 5 January this year, the Minister for Health was on "Morning Ireland" and he advised that there were five or six people waiting in the emergency department and another 36 people were on trolleys in wards. This demonstrated how out of touch he was, because the same day the INMO reported that 96 people were on trolleys in the hospital. The day before the number

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was 81, and the day before that it was 69. That is far more than the Minister's supposed 41 people. The Minister was quite happy to quote the INMO figures when he was on this side of the House, but now he is trying to distort the figures himself. January 2024 is already worse than the whole of the month of January 2023, and the record will be broken in University Hospital Limerick. As I have said, 132 people were on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick yesterday and 109 people are on trolleys there today.

I do not know if the Minister of State has been to the hospital. It has a new emergency department that opened in 2017, but the issue of capacity has never been dealt with. The reason for the number of people presenting at the hospital is because of the Fianna Fáil decision to close the emergency departments in Ennis, Nenagh and St. John's hospital. We were supposed to get a centre of excellence in Limerick but it was never delivered. That is why we have the ongoing problems.

What does it mean when people are on trolley? As I said, these are people who are deemed to be in need of a bed but there is no bed available to them. There were 21,000 people last year. There were 132 people yesterday and there are 109 people today. It is simply not good enough.

Healthcare assistants and nurses have to work in poor conditions. Recently in Limerick, our health spokesperson, Deputy Cullinane, and I met healthcare workers at the hospital. One told me she had 12 patients at that time. She was totally stressed. She did not want to leave the job because she knew there was nobody else there. There are many vacancies in the department. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine in the UK tells us that if people are waiting more than eight hours in an emergency department, one additional death will occur for every 67 people. I know it is slightly different in England from here, but it is a similar statistic. In January 2023, the BBC, quoting the vice-president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, reported that for every 82 patients who wait for more than six hours, there is one associated death. Being treated on a trolley in a hospital hallway is accompanied by a lack of privacy and dignity. It is frightening enough for people to be told they need to stay in a hospital, but having to do so in these conditions is terrible.

As per usual, the Minister for Health is not here. It is simply not good enough. He needs to face up to the fact that there needs to be a serious intervention from Government. The plan it has for the 96-bed unit will deliver 48 beds, believe it or not. It will not be there for a number of years. We are without any plan to deal with the here and now.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Quinlivan for raising this important issue in the House. The Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, is very concerned and conscious of the significant and sustained pressures experienced in University Hospital Limerick.

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He is committed to ensuring the appropriate supports are delivered to the hospital. In each of the past two years, there were approximately 80,000 attendances at the ED in Limerick, representing a 12% increase on the pre-Covid figures in 2019. While the number of people presenting to the ED last year was broadly similar to that in 2022, an additional more than 1,000 needed to be admitted. More important, the 2023 attendance figures for patients aged 75 or over increased by 30% compared with 2019, leading to admissions of our elderly patients increasing by 1,600.

Over the past year, alternative care pathways have been enhanced to reduce demand on the

ED and better facilitate patient flow. These have included, but are not limited to, the alternative pre-hospital pathway, a new collaboration that commenced in September 2023 between University Hospital Limerick and the National Ambulance Service. It will see definitive care provided in the community to patients who call 999 and will reduce the number of ambulances bringing patients directly to the ED. This involves specialist emergency medicine doctors and ambulance service personnel responding to low-acuity ambulance calls. The team will respond in an ambulance service vehicle to appropriate calls within a 45-minute radius of the ambulance centre in Limerick city. Up to the end of December 2023, this service had seen 245 patients. Of these, 52% of patients were seen via an alternative care pathway and 48% were conveyed to the ED.

Pathfinder is a partnership between the ambulance service and the hospital that was launched in Limerick in October 2022 and recently expanded its geographical area of operations throughout the mid-west. The pathfinder rapid response team responds to low-acuity 999 calls, such as from someone who has experienced a fall at home or is generally unwell. The older person is assessed by both an advanced paramedic and an occupational therapist or a physiotherapist. Up to the end of December 2023, 517 patients had been assessed by the regional pathfinder team, 54% of whom were supported at home without the need to go to the ED.

The geriatric emergency medicine unit at UHL recently expanded to nine treatment bays and to 24-hour operations during weekdays. This unit assesses elderly patients in ED with a view to avoiding unnecessary admission to hospital. Data for 2023 shows that of the 2,007 patients seen in this unit, 1,194 patients, or 59%, were discharged to their home, 240, or 12%, were transferred to a model 2 hospital, such as St John's Hospital, and 558, or 28%, were admitted to UHL.

The medical assessment unit pathway for 999 patients has been extended to St John's Hospital. This initiative means all three of the hospital group's medical assessment units can now treat patients referred by GPs, ShannonDoc or paramedics.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the Minister of State for his response, although it is clear not enough is being done in the area. We need to reduce the time people spend both waiting for a hospital bed and in hospitals. Those who are fit and healthy enough to return home should be allowed to do so, but in many cases this is not possible. The health Minister has previously stated that a seven-day-a-week discharge regime will be used and I concur with him on that, but as yet that has not been properly put in place. We must be creative and understand that care within the community can contribute to a reduction in wait times and a reduction in the number of days spent by individual patients on trolleys in UHL. The pathfinder programme to which the Minister of State referred and other community initiatives can help many elderly patients who are forced to present at emergency departments for issues that could and should be attended to at home or within the community. Such treatments lessen the stress on these patients associated with having to be present at the emergency department and improves the capacity of the hospital. Unfortunately, older people are attending the emergency department, and while I would encourage anybody who is sick to go there, they are spending hours and hours on trolleys. It is like a circus. Trolleys bash off one another, there is no space in the hallways, and staff cannot give appropriate care due to the lack of space, the number of people who are presenting and the failure of the Government over the years to deliver the services we need and the number of beds we need.

The Government's plan has for a new 96-bed unit that will actually deliver 48 new beds.

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That is not going to happen for another two years, so we will be left with two more years of this crisis, which is only getting worse. There is no plan to get us out of this. We have been talking about it for seven years and, as I said, every year it is getting worse. Every month there is a new record. Every month last year, with the exception of one month when there was an intervention, which has already been passed, was a record-breaking month for the number of people on trolleys in UHL. It is incredibly difficult for the staff to work there. They are overwhelmed and understaffed and the hospital authorities tell us an additional 200 beds are needed to bring it up to the national average, but the Government has a plan for only 48 beds in the next two years.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge the concerns of the local community and the pressures on the staff. Significant resources are being invested in University Hospital Limerick, which has seen an increase in the workforce of more than 160 whole-time equivalents since the end of 2019. Safer staffing levels for ED nursing staff have been reviewed and national approval was received to recruit additional staff nurses. Recruitment for these posts is complete, with 21.5 staff nurses in post since September 2023. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, recently opened new theatres, wards and clinical areas at Croom Orthopaedic Hospital, including the development of an ambulatory trauma service that facilitates the transfer of trauma patients from UHL for surgery and recovery, improving patient flow and ED congestion.

A key part of the solution is additional beds for Limerick, and 98 new inpatient beds have opened in UHL since the start of 2020. Construction on the new 96-single bed inpatient block commenced in October 2022 and it is anticipated this much-needed additional bed capacity for the mid-west will become operational in mid-2025. Additional works for the second 96-bed inpatient block will, pending planning permission approval, be carried out directly adjacent to the 96-bed block under construction.

Reform of service delivery as outlined in Sláintecare is vital to deal with the increased demand. This includes the expansion of community care and other measures providing people with the care they need outside of ED and improving patient flow and discharge from hospital with more home support packages and nursing home supports. The matter of ED performance is under constant review by the Minister and the Department of Health through ongoing engagement with the HSE. I assure all Members, including the Deputy as a local TD, that the Government and the Minister for Health are committed to improving ED performance in Limerick and the wider mid-west.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.08 p.m. go dtí 9.10 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 24 Eanáir 2024.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.08 p.m. until 9.10 a.m. on Wednesday, 24 January 2024.