



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe  
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

|                                                               |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil .....                          | 630 |
| Nomination of Member of Government: Motion .....              | 633 |
| Visit of Icelandic Delegation .....                           | 639 |
| Nomination of Member of Government: Motion (Resumed) .....    | 639 |
| Ukraine: Statements.....                                      | 656 |
| Message from Select Committee .....                           | 693 |
| Mercosur Trade Agreement: Motion [Private Members].....       | 693 |
| Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions ..... | 729 |
| Transport Infrastructure Ireland .....                        | 729 |
| Transport Policy .....                                        | 731 |
| Electric Vehicles .....                                       | 733 |
| National Development Plan .....                               | 735 |
| Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions .....                       | 737 |
| Public Transport .....                                        | 737 |
| Air Services .....                                            | 739 |
| Public Transport .....                                        | 740 |
| Bus Services .....                                            | 742 |
| Bus Services .....                                            | 745 |
| State Bodies.....                                             | 747 |
| Transport Policy .....                                        | 748 |
| Rail Network .....                                            | 750 |
| Road Projects .....                                           | 753 |
| Transport Policy .....                                        | 755 |
| Rail Network .....                                            | 757 |
| Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters..... | 758 |
| Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....          | 759 |
| Taxi Regulations.....                                         | 759 |

|                                         |     |
|-----------------------------------------|-----|
| Bus Services .....                      | 762 |
| Aquaculture Industry .....              | 766 |
| Scoileanna Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta..... | 769 |
| Urban Development .....                 | 772 |

## **DÁIL ÉIREANN**

*Dé Máirt, 18 Samhain 2025*

*Tuesday, 18 November 2025*

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

*Paidir agus Machnamh.*

*Prayer and Reflection.*

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2 o'clock

### **Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** You will be aware there is a change. I call on the Government Chief Whip, Deputy Mary Butler, to deliver the business proposal.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler):** I move:

That notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, the proposed arrangements as set out in the first Revised Report of the Business Committee are hereby agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Chief Whip. Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

**Deputies:** Not agreed.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies, that is absolutely fine. I propose we go with the system of 30 seconds for each Member wishing to speak.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Does this Government learn nothing? We had the absolute farce and spectacle of the Lowry Independents being in government and in opposition and all that led to, and here we are today with Leaders' Questions, Questions on Policy or Legislation and Taoiseach's Questions gone. The Government is absolutely scrapping accountability today. Just at the stroke of pen, it is scrapping accountability. There is no talk about business committees any more because the Government does what it wants to do. It never learns and it makes a farce of democracy in the House. We are absolutely opposed to this. The Government never learns and it is making a mess of this place again.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Notwithstanding the situation the Government has found itself in again, there is no excuse for us not to have Leaders' Questions and not to have Questions on Policy or Legislation. The accountability deficit the Government is committed to is continuing yet again. We are utterly against this change to the Order of Business.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** There is absolutely no reason for the Government to abandon questions to the Taoiseach and accountability by the leader of the country today. Why is the Taoiseach not taking questions as he should be today? Just because of events, it should not mean abandoning Leaders' Questions and Questions on Policy or Legislation. There is no reason for the Taoiseach not to take questions.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is pretty shameless of the Government to use the occasion of Paschal Donohoe moving on in the world to avoid answering questions today. I also want to say that the statements on paediatric care must be made into questions and answers. We pushed for this at the Business Committee. There has been a long push for a statutory inquiry into the care of children with scoliosis and spina bifida. I understand a memo was meant to go to Cabinet today. People were led to believe it was going to be signed off on but I have heard it was not signed off on at Cabinet today.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It was signed off on. Okay. I ask that we have questions in relation to that.

**The Taoiseach:** The issue was dealt with at Cabinet.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I do not agree with the change to the Order of Business today. An agreement was made last Thursday, as always. Leaders' Questions and Questions on Policy or Legislation deal with important issues, such as housing and so many matters of deep concern, and they need to be discussed today. Of course, there is also moving the writ for Galway West and now for Dublin Central. We cannot continue here week in, week out without this being discussed. I would appreciate that we have statements on it today.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** These are exceptional circumstances on the nomination of Members of Government.

*(Interruptions)*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Allow the courtesy of a response. Please, Deputies.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** The revised schedule accommodates this and ensures we continue with Dáil business, and the Taoiseach will take his questions tomorrow instead of today.

Question put: "That the business proposal by the Government Chief Whip be agreed to."

| The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 67; Staon, 0. |                           |       |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                       | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.            |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.             |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.           |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard.    |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.              |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.             |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.            |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Cairns, Holly.            |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Carthy, Matt.             |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Clarke, Sorca.            |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Collins, Michael.         |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Conway-Walsh, Rose.       |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Coppinger, Ruth.          |       |
| Cahill, Michael.                             | Cronin, Réada.            |       |
| Callaghan, Catherine.                        | Cullinane, David.         |       |
| Calleary, Dara.                              | Cummins, Jen.             |       |
| Canney, Seán.                                | Daly, Pa.                 |       |
| Carrigy, Micheál.                            | Doherty, Pearse.          |       |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.                  | Donnelly, Paul.           |       |
| Chambers, Jack.                              | Ellis, Dessie.            |       |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.                        | Farrelly, Aidan.          |       |
| Clendennen, John.                            | Gannon, Gary.             |       |
| Collins, Niall.                              | Gibney, Sinéad.           |       |
| Connolly, John.                              | Graves, Ann.              |       |
| Cooney, Joe.                                 | Guirke, Johnny.           |       |
| Cummins, John.                               | Healy, Seamus.            |       |
| Currie, Emer.                                | Hearne, Rory.             |       |
| Daly, Martin.                                | Kenny, Eoghan.            |       |
| Dempsey, Aisling.                            | Kenny, Martin.            |       |
| Devlin, Cormac.                              | Kerrane, Claire.          |       |
| Dillon, Alan.                                | Lawless, Paul.            |       |
| Dolan, Albert.                               | Lawlor, George.           |       |
| Donohoe, Paschal.                            | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.   |       |
| Dooley, Timmy.                               | McDonald, Mary Lou.       |       |
| Feighan, Frankie.                            | McGettigan, Donna.        |       |
| Fleming, Sean.                               | McGuinness, Conor D.      |       |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.                     | Mitchell, Denise.         |       |
| Geoghegan, James.                            | Murphy, Paul.             |       |
| Harkin, Marian.                              | Mythen, Johnny.           |       |
| Harris, Simon.                               | Nash, Ged.                |       |
| Healy-Rae, Danny.                            | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |       |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.                          | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |       |
| Heneghan, Barry.                             | Nolan, Carol.             |       |
| Heydon, Martin.                              | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |       |
| Higgins, Emer.                               | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |       |
| Keogh, Keira.                                | O'Flynn, Ken.             |       |

|                             |                           |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Lawless, James.             | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| Martin, Micheál.            | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.   |  |
| McEntee, Helen.             | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| Moynihan, Michael.          | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |
| Moynihan, Shane.            | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. | Sherlock, Marie.          |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            | Smith, Duncan.            |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| O'Connor, James.            | Ward, Mark.               |  |
| O'Dea, Willie.              | Whitmore, Jennifer.       |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          |                           |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         |                           |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.              |                           |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Pádraig.        |                           |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |                           |  |
| Ó Fearghail, Seán.          |                           |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |                           |  |
| Richmond, Neale.            |                           |  |
| Roche, Peter.               |                           |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.             |                           |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                           |  |
| Timmings, Edward.           |                           |  |
| Toole, Gillian.             |                           |  |
| Troy, Robert.               |                           |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Duncan Smith.

Question declared carried.

### Nomination of Member of Government: Motion

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now have the nomination of member of Government. We have an 80-minute slot, with ten minutes for each leader and time can be shared. I ask that Members advise.

**The Taoiseach:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the nomination by the Taoiseach of the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton for appointment by the President to be a member of the Government.

Ba mhian liom a fhógairt do Dháil Éireann go bhfuair mé fógra ón Aire Airgeadais, an Teachta Paschal Donohoe, go bhfuil sé ag éirí as a phost mar Aire Airgeadais agus mar bhall Rialtais. Chuir mé é sin in iúl don Uachtarán. Dá réir, molaim do Dháil Éireann ainmniúchán an Teachta Hildegard Naughton le ceapadh ag an Uachtarán le freastal mar bhall Rialtais. Ar mholadh an Tánaiste, an Teachta Simon Harris, tá sé i gceist agam an Teachta Harris a ainmniú mar Aire Airgeadais, an Teachta Helen McEntee a ainmniú mar Aire Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála agus mar Aire Cosanta, agus an Teachta Hildegard Naughton a ainmniú le freastal mar Aire Oideachais agus Óige. Chomh maith leis sin, beidh mé ag moladh don Rialtas an Teachta Emer Higgins a cheapadh mar Aire Stáit ag freastal ar an gComh-Aireacht agus táim sásta an Teachta Frank Feighan a ainmniú mar Aire Stáit ag an Roinn caiteachais.

I wish to inform the House that the President, acting on my advice, has accepted the resignation of Deputy Paschal Donohoe as a member of the Government. I intend to assign the Department of Finance to the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris. I intend to assign the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defence to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Department of Education and Youth to the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. I intend to nominate the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, to be a Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality with responsibility for disability. She will attend Government meetings. I intend to nominate Deputy Feighan as Minister of State as the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation with special responsibility for public procurement, digitalisation and e-government.

I would like to congratulate Deputy Donohoe on his appointment to such an important role in the World Bank. This appointment is a tribute to the impact he has made in three important ministerial roles over the past decade as well as his work as president of the Eurogroup. He is only the fourth person to hold that role and his election to it for three terms showed the deep esteem in which he is held throughout Europe. This appointment is also a testament to the high regard in which Ireland is held due to the active and positive work of members of Government in international institutions.

There are those who seem to assume that Ireland's standing rests on how loud we speak. The truth is that it is actually based on the much harder work of countless hours spent building relationships and showing our values through constructive work with others. Paschal's work on our behalf and on behalf of all the people of Europe deserves our thanks, respect and appreciation. He was also a tireless advocate on behalf of the communities of Dublin Central, dedicating himself to the work of promoting investment and structural change, as well as improvement to the quality of life on the ground.

On a personal level, over the past five years I have enjoyed working closely with Paschal during some of the most challenging times faced by our country and by the European Union.

He was a central part of policies which helped us to emerge strongly from the fastest recession and the largest public health emergency recorded in modern times. Although he was proud to represent his party, he always treated his colleagues from Fianna Fail and Independents with respect and understanding. He was always motivated by a belief in the values of our democratic Republic and those we share with other democracies. He was also very useful for giving you the odd tip on a book to read from time to time.

Over recent decades the role of the World Bank has changed radically. It has become a dynamic force for helping find new ways to overcome poverty and tackle disease. It is by far the largest funder of innovation in the field of development and its positive impact is felt in countless communities throughout the world. I wish Paschal, Justine and their children all the very best for their future. I know he will represent Ireland with distinction in this important new role.

The changes which I am proposing to the membership of the Government and ministerial responsibilities concern important roles. However, these changes are being made in the context of a very clear set of priorities which define the work of our term. Following the mandate we secured in last year's general election, the parties and Deputies that support the Government resoundingly endorsed a comprehensive programme for Government to be implemented across five years. While we unfortunately have many in the House who cannot bring themselves to respect the mandate of others, we will continue to fulfil ours.

We have already prepared and put in place the largest programme of investment and development in our country's history through the national development plan. Comprehensive action on speeding up the delivery of housing has been prepared and is being implemented. We have completed our first budget, giving priority to developing essential services, developing infrastructure, supporting those most in need and protecting our economy in the event of a downturn, and the Finance Bill has almost completed its journey through the House. We have also responded to rapidly changing international conditions, working to ensure Ireland has the foundations in place to secure our economy and social supports. These are defining parts of our work this year and will continue. As Minister for Finance, the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, will, with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, move forward the Government's plans and our commitment to securing social and economic progress.

Deputy Helen McEntee will move to the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence at a critical moment. While we will formally hold the Presidency of the Council of Ministers from mid-year, work on our commitments as part of the Presidency is already well under way, as is our active work in promoting a just peace for the Palestinian people and the people of Ukraine and Sudan. The invitation for me to attend the G20 meeting in South Africa is a reflection of the high standing of our contributions to international debates and of the fact that the country is already a key part of various critical discussions. I am determined that Ireland will continue to have its voice heard on vital international issues and on promoting a positive agenda for the future of Europe. Holding the European Union Presidency is always a significant challenge for smaller countries. It requires a large amount of attention, but the benefit to the country of a positive Presidency is always significant.

We will also push forward our plans to improve our ability to defend ourselves against very real threats. Investment in our Defence Forces and defence capabilities will remain a priority. I look forward to working closely with Deputy McEntee during what is already an intense

period of activity in European and international affairs. I have no doubt that her extensive experience of the Council of Ministers and operations at the highest level of the European Union will have a positive impact. She was formerly a Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Investment, reform and inclusion in education are central to our programme for Government. Deputy Hildegard Naughton will bring extensive experience to the role of Minister for Education and Youth and is in a position to have immediate impact. The agenda in the Department of Education and Youth is an exciting one. It involves completing important curricular reform, which will ensure we update what we teach and ensure high quality. Our programme of dramatic investment in the quality of educational facilities will continue to accelerate, as will our implementation of major reforms to the level and nature of critical supports for children with special needs. A new model of provision of key therapies in special schools is proceeding and will be an important part of the new Minister's work in conjunction with the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan. Given her past work in this area, I know that Deputy Naughton will make an important contribution to a new era in special education. The Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will continue the fiscal and economic underpinning that will enable us to implement all these important plans.

It is a proud day when any person is nominated to serve as a member of the Government of a democratic republic. I wish Deputy Naughton well in her new role. I congratulate her and acknowledge her family and supporters in Galway who have worked hard for her over the years. I also congratulate the highly regarded Deputy Frank Feighan on his elevation to the office of Minister of State. I know this House will receive his appointment well.

Gabhaim buíochas arís leis an Teachta Donohoe as a sheirbhís ar son mhuintir na hÉireann agus guím gach ádh agus rath air ina ról tábhachtach. Molaim don Dáil ainmniúchán an Teachta Hildegard Naughton le ceapadh mar Aire Rialtais.

**The Tánaiste:** The Dáil meets today at a time of change within the Government, but equally at a moment of continued cohesion. This is made possible because we live in a country with a stable Government that has a collective commitment to a programme for Government and a clear mission to build and secure a prosperous future for the people of Ireland. My friend and colleague, Paschal Donohoe, has served with unparalleled distinction for over 18 years as an Oireachtas Member and over 14 years as a member of Dáil Éireann. He has presided over ten budgets as either Minister for Finance or Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, which, if not quite record-breaking, is an extraordinary achievement in any modern parliamentary democracy. He has also served as Minister for Transport and Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, where he established himself as a highly effective and trusted Minister. On the international stage, he has been elected as president of the Eurogroup on three occasions, which makes clear the extremely high regard in which he is held by colleagues across the EU. In the constituency of Dublin Central, Paschal won and repeatedly held a seat for Fine Gael time and again. He did so through his sheer personal effort, hard work and the characteristic bond he has built with his constituents to whom I know he has been deeply committed.

He has performed all of these roles with an acumen that has led to a unique level of public trust in his steadiness, steeliness and stalwart dedication to this country's economic well-being.

His calm stewardship helped to guide Ireland through some of the most challenging periods in our recent history, including Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and a period of major global economic uncertainty. His prudent management of the public finances has underpinned Ireland's recovery and growth, ensuring that our economy remains resilient and our society continues to prosper. Of course, those of us who work closely with Paschal on a personal level know that he brings to the job a determined and undimmed optimism, unflappable good humour and exceptional collegiality and friendship. We are immensely proud of all he has done and of his latest achievement as he becomes managing director and chief knowledge officer of the World Bank, based in Washington DC.

It is impossible to find words for how much we will miss him as a friend and colleague. I can only wish my good friend, Paschal, along with Justine, Oscar and Lucy, every happiness and success in the next chapter of their lives. He should know that we will always be here for him and we will always count him among our friends. Paschal, go raibh míle maith agat agus comhghairdeas.

I turn to the appointment of Ministers, which the Taoiseach has just announced. I will move to the Department of Finance, where my commitment is working with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, to continue to steer Ireland's economic policy; to continue our record level of investment in infrastructure while we reform delivery; to pull every lever we can to deliver increased housing supply; to wisely manage our resources to deliver better public services as our population grows; to protect jobs and back businesses and farmers; and to save and plan for the future in an uncertain world. I look forward to working closely with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Taoiseach in the time ahead.

Deputy Helen McEntee is being appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Minister for Defence, where I know she will bring to bear her years of experience as Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs and as a senior member of the Cabinet. This appointment will come at a time when Ireland's place in the world and our relationships with Europe, the United States of America and our nearest neighbours in the UK and further afield have never been more important. It is a moment of great geopolitical upheaval and instability, but one in which Ireland has been and must continue to be a calm, reliable voice for diplomacy and dialogue. I know that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, will continue to be a strong voice for that approach. It also comes at a time where we are preparing for Ireland to hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of next year. I look forward to working closely with her and colleagues across government on what will be a significant period for Ireland and its place in the EU.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton is being appointed Minister for Education and Youth, where I know she will bring valuable years of experience, including as Minister of State in that Department. She has a particularly deep commitment to children with special educational needs. I know she will continue to develop the national education therapy service, increase the number of special places and SNAs, increase teacher supply overall and drive forward our new school building programme, which is needed for our growing population.

Deputy Emer Higgins will take on the role of Minister of State with responsibility for disability at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. Working closely with the Minister, Deputy Foley, she will advance this enormously important role as we seek to bring about a step change in the delivery of services following an unprecedented level of investment

in the last budget in disability services and through the implementation of our new national disability strategy.

In recognition of his long service and significant experience in the Oireachtas, Deputy Frank Feighan is being appointed to the role of Minister of State at the Department of public expenditure with special responsibility for public procurement, digitalisation and e-government. He will work there to lead the agenda on better procurement of public contracts and advancing the Government's digital agenda. I know Frank will bring to this role his many years of experience as a Member of both Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann.

I am particularly pleased that in making today's appointments, I have had the opportunity to promote three women, including the country's first female foreign affairs Minister and first female defence Minister. I am putting forward a team of talent, experience and commitment across government to work in a united fashion with the two parties in government and with our Independents to implement our programme.

Paschal leaves us having just completed his final budget but it is the first of five budgets for this Government. We have much work to do and we remain intensely focused on delivery. We have just published the new national housing plan and we will shortly publish an action plan to accelerate the delivery of essential infrastructure - key priorities for every member of this Government. We have been able to provide record levels of investment and we must now match that with record levels of effort to deliver continued success.

We should not take our strong economic position for granted. It is not an accident that we are in the economic position we find ourselves in. We must continue to be careful. We must continue to be prudent as we face geopolitical headwinds and potential economic volatility. We have run budget surpluses for the past three years, and we must continue to make the right political choices in the years ahead. We must be balanced and we must be responsible but we also must know that the security of our economy depends on investing in the ingenuity of our people. So, with every decision we make in the time ahead, we must continue to invest - invest in our people - protect jobs and enhance our economic competitiveness.

Having served as Taoiseach, as a senior Minister in five Government Departments and as a Minister of State in the Department of Finance, having chaired the Cabinet committee on the economy and having chaired the Government trade forum, I am looking forward to taking on the role of Minister for Finance, and working with colleagues across government and across the Oireachtas on economic policy and keeping this country's economy secure. For me, economic prosperity and social cohesion go hand in hand, and I know that is a value we share across government. We must manage our public finances responsibly and equitably for our citizens. As per the programme for Government, we will use windfall receipts to address strategic infrastructure deficits, never for the day-to-day, and we will continue to build up our long-term savings funds to help this country withstand future shocks. Should that shock come, I, and the Government, will always cleave to two principles: we will continue to build and we will continue to protect our public services.

I look forward to preparing a new medium-term fiscal plan with colleagues - the Minister, Deputy Chambers, in particular - setting out a budgetary path to anchor sustainable public finances, deliver progress on the economic and social priorities of the Government and protect the long-term prospects of our country.

I know that when developments like today's occur, it can be a moment of intrigue and it can certainly be a moment of shock but it will not be a moment of interruption. There will be no pause in the momentum we must demonstrate in the business of Government. There is always more to do. We will meet the challenges which confront us now, just as we have done in the past. Let us get on with the job.

Debate adjourned.

### **Visit of Icelandic Delegation**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before we move to the next speaker, it would be remiss of us not to welcome the Icelandic speaker, Ms Þórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir, and her delegation from the Althing. They are very welcome. They have spent two days here in Ireland.

**The Taoiseach:** A Cheann Comhairle, I think we should thank the soccer manager as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have thanked the soccer manager, most certainly, as well as Troy Parrott.

### **Nomination of Member of Government: Motion (Resumed)**

The following motion was moved by the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin:

That Dáil Éireann approves the nomination by the Taoiseach of the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton for appointment by the President to be a member of the Government.

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney):** I rise today to pay tribute to my colleague, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, on the occasion of his departure from Cabinet. It is an important moment for this House and the country because it marks the close of a remarkable chapter in public service, one defined by stability, integrity and an unwavering commitment to the Irish people. Paschal Donohoe has given incredible service to this State since he first entered the Dáil in 2011. His contribution stretches across more than a decade of national decision-making, including some of the most challenging periods in modern Irish economic history. I want to place on record my sincere best wishes to him, both personally and on behalf of the Independent colleagues whom I have the privilege to lead in Cabinet.

It was an honour to serve alongside Paschal in the Cabinet of the Thirty-fourth Dáil. As Minister for Finance, he brought a steadiness that never wavered, even in moments of deep uncertainty. His approach on every issue, large or small, showed the same calm judgment and the same respect for the process of government. His leadership was instrumental in guiding Ireland through some of the most testing economic conditions in recent times. During the years of Brexit, the Covid pandemic, global inflationary pressures and significant geopolitical instability, Paschal's voice consistently brought reassurance. He had a deep understanding of the Irish economy but, more importantly, he understood the people behind the numbers - the families, the workers, the businesses and the communities whose well-being depends on sound and careful economic management. His stewardship of the public finances gave this country

confidence when confidence was badly needed. He demonstrated that economic competence and compassion are not competing values but complementary responsibilities. He was clear, he was principled and he was honest, even when the advice he gave or the decisions he had to take were difficult. That integrity was recognised at home and abroad.

On a personal note, I will miss working with Paschal. We first worked together during my time in the Office of Public Works in 2016. From that period on, I came to know him as a straight-talking, highly capable and deeply committed colleague - somebody who listened carefully, considered every viewpoint and never sought credit for himself. What mattered to him was the outcome, not the headlines. Around the Cabinet table, Paschal always focused on the long-term consequences of decisions. He had the discipline to look past the political cycle and keep sight of the broader national interest, a quality that is essential.

His presence brought balance, his contributions brought perspective, and his approach brought civility to debates that often occurred under significant pressure. His record speaks for itself: budget after budget delivered stability, restored confidence in Ireland's public finances, strengthened international relationships, including within the Eurogroup, where he earned enormous respect, and demonstrated the ability, year after year, to keep Ireland on a sustainable economic path while also ensuring the State could invest in housing, public services and infrastructure on a scale that simply would not have been possible without sound financial management.

As he embarks on the next stage of his career, I wish Paschal every possible success. I hope the years ahead bring him the same sense of fulfilment that his years in office have brought to this country. Ireland's loss is the world's gain.

The Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, now takes up the mantle of Minister for Finance, a challenge he will no doubt rise to. The Tánaiste is an extremely experienced voice at the table. His previous roles will solidify his position. In fact, his first ministerial role was as Minister of State in the Department of Finance in 2014.

Deputy Helen McEntee, who is beside me, is now Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Minister for Defence, and I congratulate her on her role, a role I know she will bring a wealth of experience and expertise to. She is no stranger to the foreign affairs side of things, having previously served as Minister of State for European affairs.

My fellow Galwegian Deputy Hildegard Naughton now assumes the role of Minister for Education and Youth. I am truly delighted for her. She has been the Government Chief Whip, a role she carried out extremely well, and she comes from a role as Minister of State in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. In fact, she is also a former Minister of State in my Department, the Department of Transport. She will bring another strong female voice to the Cabinet, which is very welcome.

I also congratulate Deputy Frankie Feighan, my friend from Roscommon, and Deputy Emer Higgins on their new roles. I assure the Tánaiste, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, of my full support and that of the Independent colleagues going forward. We wish them the very best of luck in their new roles.

From a Government perspective, over the last number of months we have launched a new housing plan and a revised national development plan, which will be the root of our nation over

the coming years. The updated national development plan provides unprecedented levels of investment to secure Ireland's future, unlock housing, upgrade water and energy infrastructure, deliver more roads and provide more public transport. The housing plan, launched just last week, is a major step towards tackling the housing challenge through practical action, reform and investment. Together in government, we will continue to accelerate our housing and infrastructure goals, and the changes in Cabinet today will solidify that. This is a Government of intent and implementation. Back in January, when my Independent colleagues and I decided to go into government and agree a programme for Government to deliver change-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** We are all waiting for the change.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** -----we were waiting to make sure that over the next four years we would do that. I look forward to working with my colleagues for the next four years.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Today, we note the resignation of the Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, as he leaves the Government to take up a senior position with the World Bank. Paschal and I have been constituency colleagues in Dublin Central for many years and I wish him, his wife and his family well. I genuinely hope that the next chapter in their lives brings them good health and much happiness.

Today, we must confront honestly the record of the Government he leaves behind, a record defined not by service or ambition but, rather, by a relentless commitment to clinging to power at all costs. This Government came into being on the back of a grubby deal with Deputy Michael Lowry and his associates, and it certainly shows. It was an arrangement that allowed them to attempt to play both Government and Opposition at the same time, if you recall. It was a deal born of desperation for office rather than dedication to the Irish people.

From its first moments in office, the rot had set in. From day one, the focus of the Taoiseach and his colleagues was on not solving problems but consolidating privilege. Its first act was the appointment of the largest number of super junior Ministers in the history of the State, with enhanced salaries, enhanced perks and enhanced comfort for themselves. They are literally tripping over each other. There is that many Ministries that it would make your head spin.

Then, of course, came the bike shed scandal, and after that, it was scandal after scandal, culminating in the deeply traumatic and, indeed, devastating scandal surrounding the failure of young Harvey Morrison Sherratt, who was left to wait and wait and suffer agony. There was no four-month timeline for him, Tánaiste. Harvey lost his young life. It is a painful reminder of the system that fails a child and not alone him, fails families and not alone his, fails communities and not alone his, and then, worst of all, fails to own up to it.

While the Government was consumed by scandals of its own making, the crises facing ordinary people were left to spiral out of control. Nowhere is this more evident than in housing. We have the worst housing crisis in the history of the State, with record homelessness, record rents and soaring house prices. Entire generations are locked out of home ownership, trapped in extortionate rent or forced abroad. Young people are told by the Government's actions, despite all of the windy rhetoric, that in the end their future lies somewhere else.

It does not end there because this year, the Government delivered a budget of €9.4 billion and, astonishingly, it managed to leave working people worse off. That is some achievement. While people are struggling to keep the heat on, pay the rent, fill their shopping trolleys and put petrol in the car, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael chose to give a €250 million tax break to developers and a €105,000 tax break for wealthy executives but nothing for ordinary tax-paying workers. Increased tax breaks were given to landlords but renters were left out in the cold. There were no cost-of-living supports for workers, no income tax cuts for ordinary families and absolutely no relief for those under huge pressure literally just to get by. In fact, instead of helping people, the Government's budget and decisions actively make life harder by taking away energy credits, scrapping the double child benefit payment, increasing the price of petrol and diesel, hiking student fees by €500, increasing road tolls, increasing the local property tax and enabling runaway rents to rise even further. You could not make it up.

Workers and families are being hit from all sides and the Government is the one swinging the hammer. People are now afraid to turn on their heating despite the cold. Does the Taoiseach know that? Does he know that they dread opening their electricity bills? Does he know that food prices are now just beyond many families? Does he know that working people on decent wages are struggling too? Does he know that families have cut back on essentials? Does he know that the anxiety for them is constant? All the while, they have to listen to Government members backslapping each other, in the grip of delusion, insisting that things are fine. Things are not fine. This is not leadership; this is delusion.

The Government's ongoing attempts to undermine our position as a military neutral are both short-sighted and dangerous. Most of all, they are in defiance of the will of the Irish people. If the Government thinks I am wrong, it should put the matter to a referendum and find out.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** This year, though, has most of all been the year of broken promises by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, promises loudly made at election time and then thrown in the bin. The occupied territories Bill, diluted and sidelined, is a case in point. The Government promised tax cuts for workers, but it gave them to banks, landlords and developers instead. It promised support on energy bills, but it withdrew the energy credits. It promised to increase the renters' credit; it did not deliver. Does the Government remember that it promised €200 a month childcare? Where is that? It is not delivered. It promised to abolish student fees but then increased them by €500.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It promised to abolish the means test for carers. So much for that. There was precious nothing. It promised 3,000 new acute hospital beds but it has budgeted for just 220. It promised a permanent double child benefit and then it withdrew that as well.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It has been a year of promises made and promises broken. Amid all this crisis, chaos and failure, what has the Government achieved in the Dáil? Well, hardly any legislation. It has been a legislative wasteland. It is a Government functioning on fumes and a coalition that governs by press release, not by law or action. This may well be the worst Government in the history of the State, because no Government has presided over such a combination of record crises, hollow promises and stubborn inaction. Working people, children, disabled people and carers pay the price. Let me tell you who is paying the highest price. It is Ireland's young people, that is who. It is young workers locked into eye-watering rents, students paying higher fees, people in their 20s and 30s with no hope of buying a home, and young families squeezed by childcare costs. It is the Government's failures that push them to leave this country in their droves. Any Government that fails its young people has failed Ireland.

Let me finish with this. Our citizens need action, real action, to end the rip-offs, the scandals and the crises afflicting our society. Action is needed to cut energy prices, to reduce grocery bills, to actually build affordable houses, to bring down rents and to reduce childcare costs. This is action that can be taken right here, right now today. We in Sinn Féin will fight for that action every step of the way because Ireland deserves better than this Government, workers deserve better than this Government and young people deserve better than this Government.

Tá an tAire Airgeadais ag fágáil agus ba chóir don Rialtas ar fad fágáil leis. Is é ceann de na Rialtais is measa chonaiceamar riamh. Tá fíorathrú ag teacht mar tá muintir na hÉireann réidh. Tá Éire réidh. Tá an Rialtas seo gearrtha amach ó ghnáthdhaoine agus tá an t-am istigh. The Government is out of touch, out of ideas and should be out of time. Today, the Minister for Finance is taking his leave. Oh, that the rest of ye would follow.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Hear, hear.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before I call on the leader of the Labour Party, I welcome a German delegation, including political advisers, from the embassy. They are all very welcome. Everybody in the Gallery is very welcome. Staying on time, I call on Deputy Ivana Bacik.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Go raibh maith agat. I am sharing time with our finance spokesperson, Deputy Ged Nash.

3 o'clock

At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the utterly tragic news from Louth at the weekend. Five young lives were lost horrifically on our roads. I express my deepest sympathies to their families and communities on behalf of the Labour Party.

Today's shock announcement by the outgoing Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe - I think the Tánaiste used the word "shock" and while certainly it is a shock to us, it clearly was to him as well - underscores the crisis at the heart of this Government. On a personal level and on behalf of the Labour Party, I wish Deputy Donohoe very well in his new role. I wish him and his family well as he goes to the World Bank. I hope he will still find the time to continue writing his book reviews. Similarly, on a personal level, I send my best wishes to the newly reshuffled Ministers, Deputies Harris and McEntee, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton

and the Ministers of State, Deputies Higgins and Feighan on their elevation. I welcome the fact that we will now see more women in Cabinet. I welcome the fact that for the first time in Irish history, we are going to have a woman in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. That is very welcome.

However, Deputy Donohoe's announcement today indicates an abject lack of direction from Government. After less than a year in office, it shows the Government has no coherent programme of policies for the future; indeed, it seems the Taoiseach and the members of Government have no confidence, not even in themselves. There is no other way to describe so sudden a departure of such a senior Cabinet member less than a year after Government formation. It is a clear expression of lack of confidence. It demonstrates a crisis of confidence. Earlier this year, I remarked that the Taoiseach has become a very tetchy Taoiseach. I think he is now being joined by a rather twitchy Tánaiste and a fleeing finance Minister.

*(Interruptions)*

**The Taoiseach:** One more "T" word now.

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Deputy Bacik has to get a fourth one now. Keep going. I am looking forward to Deputy Nash now.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** Leave it to me.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Hat-trick. I am doing a Troy Parrott.

On a serious note, insecurity and instability now lie at the heart of the financial engine of the State and at the heart of this Government in general. That matters because a government that lacks stability cannot offer hope. All of us feel the need for hope among the people and the communities we represent - people who feel the reality of the housing crisis or the sharp end of the cost-of-living crisis, people with less money in their bank accounts at the end of the week or the month, with grocery and energy bills, insurance, rent and mortgage costs rising. Thousands of families are being driven into debt. Another generation of young adults face emigration. Thousands of children are on waiting lists. Some 300,000 households are in arrears on electricity bills.

This is a Government of failure that has no answers. It had no answers from its inception and it has no answers now. A *lastminute.com* change of personnel does not provide new answers. The Government is a conservative coalition cobbled together in three parts: two Civil War enemies, uneasily united and relics of a bygone era, with a third leg made up of the so-called Independents, the western alliance, and a Lowry leg of this wobbly stool uneasily united by Deputy Michael Lowry, a man found to be corrupt by a tribunal who literally gave two fingers to the Dáil. This reshuffle brings back all those rather bad memories for all of us of that unedifying spectacle.

The Government represents the politics of the past, which cannot offer hope to hard-pressed households. We saw that in the October budget, which was a gift to burger barons and big builders, as Deputy Nash said, with reckless tax cuts, massive giveaways to corporate chains and nothing for working families. We need an alternative politics that delivers massive State-

led investment. The Labour Party mission is for an active State. That is why we believe we need a left-led Government. We saw a real appetite for that sort of alternative politics and alternative Ireland in the landslide win, just two and a half weeks ago, by Catherine Connolly in the presidential election. In her campaign, she united the parties of the left and other parties comprising people who see the need for an alternative vision and for an active State that can provide for those in need, that can build homes, tackle the cost-of-living crisis and provide public services and those climate action measures that seem to have slipped off this Government's agenda but are so patently necessary to secure the future for our children and grandchildren.

This resignation takes place at a very challenging time. There is ongoing uncertainty with Trump's tariffs and trade tantrums, and a winter of rising bills and stagnating wages ahead of us. That is why we need a strong and secure programme for change, a programme that will guarantee greater security to households and secure lives and livelihoods. Changing the names on the doors in Government Buildings will not provide that security or hope for the future. The Taoiseach's coalition, it seems, will continue to govern with an approach that smacks of more of the same. Maybe the Minister, Deputy McEntee, will finally pass the occupied territories Bill in full by Christmas, as we in opposition have been pressing for the Government to do. Maybe the Minister, Deputy Naughton, will address the scandal of the thousands of children waiting for assessments of need and for school places, the lack of places for autism services and all of those issues that Cara Darmody and others have been bringing up so frequently. What we saw last week in the housing plan was more of the same. It is a so-called new housing plan that was nothing more than old milk in new bottles and so little hope for those locked out of homeownership. A locked-out generation is being told to hang in there at the same time they see annual housing targets simply removed from the plan and at a time we see 5,000 children in homelessness, which is a national disgrace.

We need more than a change of personnel. We need a change of government. We need a left-led government because only such a government can deliver the hope and security families, households and communities around the country so badly need and are so badly looking for. We wish the individual Ministers well in their new roles but we cannot have hope they will offer any sort of security for the future with their Government.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** County Louth has been in mourning over the past few days and we all unite in sending our sympathies and condolences to the families left behind after that unspeakable tragedy outside Dundalk on Saturday night.

I congratulate Deputy Donohoe on his appointment. This is a very significant personal achievement and this is also a very significant achievement for Ireland. This is evidence of the respect in which Ireland is held on the international stage and the respect he has commanded in the context of his presidency of the Eurogroup. That is evidenced in his appointment announced today.

Deputy Donohoe and I were appointed to government on the exact same day, along with Deputy Alan Kelly. There are only two survivors of that Government in the House. I hope we have shown that you can disagree with somebody philosophically and politically but remain firm friends and I like to think we are just that.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Yes

**Deputy Ged Nash:** While we may differ politically, I will miss him at some of the same gigs we managed to attend. While we differ politically, we also differ in terms of our football teams as well but we can move beyond that. In Deputy Donohoe's engagement with me and my party over the years, he has shown nothing but respect, integrity and honour and I thank him for that. I wish him, Justine and the family every success in his next chapter.

The changing of a Minister for Finance is no small thing. When the figure at the top of the Department of Finance changes, the dynamic of a Government and the relationship between the Minister and the Department of public expenditure changes as well. That access is really important. Under the Tánaiste, this dynamic, of course, will change. One of the most unjustifiable and unwarranted tax cuts in decades was made in budget 2026. It is contained in the Finance Bill and it is the nonsensical VAT cut down to 9% for the hospitality sector. This tax cut, at the expense of working people who will pay more tax next year as a result of this, has the Tánaiste's fingerprints all over it. In fact, the only people who seem to think that boosting the bottom line of burger barons was a good idea was Deputy Harris, the new Minister for Finance, and the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Burke. I have said time and again, based on all of the evidence and actions of this Government, and its previous iterations, that this, and the previous Administration's, reputation for responsible fiscal management is wholly unwarranted. The Minister, Deputy Harris's, 9% VAT rate cut proves that point. We cannot have more of this. If we get more of the same from the incoming Minister for Finance, the economy is sure to hit the rails. This VAT cut alone makes me wonder about the incoming Minister's judgment on economic affairs, what we may expect and what may lie ahead.

A responsible Minister for Finance would use this opportunity today to frame his or term in that office by saying that these kinds of wheezes will not be entertained anymore and that he or she will carefully and responsibly manage the economy, for example, by indexing tax changes for working people over the next few years in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. A responsible Minister for Finance would ensure as well that they would do something that has sadly been lacking in recent years, which is to make our budget-making system more transparent that there would be more accountability to this House and to Dáil committees on how we spend the public's money because budgets these days are quite simply works of fiction.

I congratulate all of those on their new appointments today: the new Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, Deputy McEntee, the newly-minted Minister of state, Deputy Feighan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins as well. I have one word of advice for the incoming Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton. Yesterday, those of us who are TDs in Louth were receiving emails from a principal of Darver National School advising students to bring in toilet roll and their own hand towels with them today. She should commit to making education genuinely free. That should be the Minister's legacy.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** At the outset, I express my deep sorrow at the loss of five young lives in a horrific car crash in Louth at the weekend. My thoughts are with their families, their friends and their local communities at this terrible time.

I want to use this opportunity to wish the Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, well as he leaves public office. The Minister has managed something very rare in politics, which is to keep a secret and to surprise everybody today. We obviously do not agree on lots but I know the Minister has worked very hard since his election. On a personal level and on behalf of the Social Democrats, I wish him and his family the very best.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Thank you.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Further changes have been announced at Cabinet today. The Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, becomes the Minister for Finance, his sixth position in Cabinet in nearly a decade. The Minister, Deputy Helen McEntee, becomes the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade; the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, has been appointed to the Cabinet as the Minister for Education and Youth; the Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins, has been promoted to Minister of State for disability; and Deputy Frankie Feighan will be Minister of State with the Department of public expenditure. I want to sincerely wish them all well in their new roles. I welcome that the gender balance at the Cabinet table will improve somewhat. I especially congratulate the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on being the first female Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Infamously, earlier this year more men named James were appointed to the Cabinet than women. Even with this change, the number of women at the Cabinet has just been restored to where it was at the last Government. That is important to note. It is high time we saw more progress and more diversity in general at the Cabinet table.

People watching at home today will see some changes to the Cabinet but will they notice any change in their own lives after this reshuffle? There are so many people out there who are under enormous pressure and they want to know what these changes will mean for them. Will a new Minister for Finance signal a new approach from the Government that intends to take the cost-of-living crisis seriously and provide supports to those struggling with that crisis? Will targeted energy credits now be introduced? Will we see more action to get transparency and accountability for soaring grocery prices? Will we finally see the Government take on supermarkets and force them to publish their profits? Will the scourge of child poverty finally be tackled? Last year the number of children living in consistent poverty doubled. Will those children finally be lifted out of poverty so they have a chance of reaching their full potential?

What will it mean for those desperately trying to keep a roof over their heads and the tens of thousands of people who are locked out of home ownership? We had a housing plan last week that delivered more of the same. Will changes to the Cabinet today mean any change in approach there, so the delivery of social and affordable homes is finally turbocharged? What I increasingly notice when I speak to people about housing is the despair that so many people feel. People feel trapped and they feel helpless. They have run out of hope that things will change for the better. Will this change at Cabinet signal anything to them that change is coming or is it just going to be business as usual?

The issue of disability services is something that the Social Democrats feel very strongly about. Ireland is a wealthy country but we continually fail disabled people. The treatment of disabled children and their families is simply outrageous. Just today we have had new figures that the number of children overdue an assessment of need has now exceeded 18,000. When

those children are finally assessed, what will happen? They will be put on waiting lists of up to 13 years to get critical therapies and supports. They are, therefore, waiting to get on another waiting list. It is truly shameful. I do not think that anyone in government would actually disagree with me on that but if they wanted to radically change that today, they could have appointed a senior Minister for disabilities, someone at the Cabinet table whose singular focus is disability services and improving them, someone who is going to take on the huge waiting lists for assessments and services, someone who will guarantee that every child has an appropriate school place and, crucially, someone who will ensure disabled people are treated with dignity and can live full and independent lives. Unfortunately, that decision was not taken today. It is a missed opportunity.

Will today's Cabinet appointments help us reach our climate targets? As everyone knows, we are on course to miss them by a country mile. The Minister has, for the first time, actually acknowledged they will be missed. Incredibly, he does not seem to want to do anything differently, or nothing that I can see. We are on course to miss our targets and incur billions of euro in fines from the EU for doing so. Perhaps the new Minister for Finance will act rationally and invest that money into climate mitigation, public transport, renewable energy, retrofitting, and sustainable agriculture instead of using it to pay the enormous fines we could have avoided.

I could continue for the rest of the day to list areas that need reform and investment because the truth is the country is not working for too many people in too many ways. However, it does not have to be like that. We are a wealthy country with so much potential that has yet to be realised. The crises we face in housing, in healthcare, in disability services, in childcare and in nature are not inevitable. They are not written in stone. They can be tackled and they can be surmounted but we need an acknowledgement from Government in its new incarnation that what they have been doing is not working, that the wrong political choices caused all of these crises and that the right ones can resolve them.

For people out there who are watching at home and feeling a huge disconnect from the words they hear from Government Ministers and from the reality they see in their own lives of strained family budgets, of overdue bills, of threadbare public services and a lack of critical infrastructure, it is important to note that real change is possible. We saw in the recent election of President Catherine Connolly that this change is at our fingertips, that her hopeful vision for a new Ireland resonated across the country and that this vision can become a reality. The Social Democrats will continue to do what we have always done, which is to propose constructive and progressive solutions and continue to work to hold this Government to account, to work towards a change of Government and, ultimately, to work towards a change of approach.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I am sharing time with Deputies Coppinger and Boyd Barrett.

On a personal level, I wish the former Minister for Finance well but on a political level and on an ideas level, I do not wish his ideas and his politics well. It is worth examining what Paschal Donohoe's ideology has been and what it has meant. He is one of the more ideological and more considered figures within the political establishment in Ireland. What characterises the more general statements by the former Minister is to talk about the defence of the centre and that the centre must hold against extremes of left and right. He characterises himself as a centrist and Fine Gael as centrist, and presumably Fianna Fáil as a centrist. What does that mean? First, let us consider the extremes of left and right. The left are those who say that we

should have decent access to housing for everybody, that we should have free childcare, that we should have a decent national health service and that we should have a society based on people's needs not profit. The right, of course, are those who want to demonise the most vulnerable, who want to burn down IPAS centres and so on but look substantially at this centrism Paschal Donohoe speaks of and what this Government has legislated for? Take the example of the last budget. This is centrism and this is what is packaged as what is sensible, normal and not very ideological at all. In one of the richest countries in the world with a record budget surplus, this Government and Paschal Donohoe decided to make disabled people poorer, and not just poorer in real terms but poorer in nominal terms by well over €1,000. This Government decided to make the poorest income group poorer by over 4% in real terms. It decided to make everybody, ordinary people, poorer by about 2% while giving huge tax breaks to big business. This is presented as sensible centrism.

An article in the *Business Post*, which got very little coverage or very little kind of echo, was very interesting. It was revealing of how the Government actually operates. The article refers to a meeting between the heads of Google and the then Minister for Finance:

Briefing documents for the meeting show Donohoe offered a number of commitments on tax changes to Ashkenazi [head of Google], several of which were subsequently delivered or signalled in the budget.

One of those is worth more than €300 million. Google was able to knock on the front door, come in, meet the Minister for Finance and get a tax break of €300 million in the same budget that made disabled people poorer. This gets to the heart of what Tariq Ali has described as the "extreme centre". The extreme centre thinks that hard choices need to be made for the poor, the disabled and workers but if you are Apple, Paschal Donohoe and this Government will spend millions to fight for your right not to pay tax, if you are Google you get tax changes in order to minimise your tax liability and if you are a developer you get a massive tax break. This is why we need a fundamental change of Government and who the Government represents.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I was going to address Deputy Donohoe as Minister; I do not know what to call him right now. Obviously, personally I wish him and his family well but I am here to be political. He is a very ideological person so I am sure he will appreciate this.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** You are not lacking in ideology yourself, now.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** No, and I am proud of it. I am proud to be a socialist and there are not many of us here.

**The Taoiseach:** I thought you were all socialists together a couple of weeks ago.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The Taoiseach is eating into my time, which is very little. I want to start with where Deputy Donohoe is going with his new job. The World Bank and the IMF usually work together. Their policies drive inequality and austerity all around the globe. They decrease workers' rights, environmental considerations and life expectancy in any country they go into. We have a situation where 1% owns more than 95% of the wealth according to Oxfam,

and where a dozen men roughly have the same amount of wealth as half of the entire planet. This is the system the World Bank presides over and that Deputy Donohoe will also preside over. Regarding the debt burden on African countries, 18.5% of the income of Africa is spent servicing the debt which Deputy Donohoe will be presiding over as well. This is more than many of them spend on healthcare.

I feel these points are very important because there is a lot of back clapping and wishing Deputy Donohoe well on his promotion but he has been rewarded for, I believe, being a loyal proponent of austerity and an implementer of it since 2014 when the IMF was in the country. He has presided over many budgets that really did inflict a lot of hardship. He is being rewarded for not implementing things like the occupied territories Bill and for recent budgets which, even though we are back in record surplus, disabled people and workers paid for very severely.

I want to mention also that this is a reshuffle of the Government and we are going to be voting specifically on Deputy Naughton. Again, this is nothing personal but she has been in charge of special education for quite a number of years and there has been a severe crisis in that area. I am not inspired with confidence because there has been a huge crisis in the need for autism classes and facilities for people who are neurodivergent, which she has stood over. We need more than a reshuffle. We need a new Government because for the year it has been in power it has severely disappointed and made ordinary working people pay for the crisis.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** On a personal level I wish the Minister and his family the very best. He has been a civil and thoughtful adversary for the years we have both been in the House. He never held back in letting us know what he thought about our perspective on politics and economics. I am not going to hold back in saying that I think the legacy that has been left behind by the years of Fine Gael Government since I have been in the House, and Deputy Donohoe has been in the House, is not one to be proud of. He simply cannot escape responsibility for a disastrous and ongoing housing and homelessness crisis, which has plunged so many people into the misery of emergency accommodation, rotting for years and sometimes decades on housing lists and being crucified by unaffordable rents. Indeed, as reported by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul today, as we head towards Christmas and a cold snap record numbers of people in low-income and middle-income families are begging for help to get them through the Christmas months. This is from a Government that has record budget surpluses.

The truth is that years of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government have left us with this disastrous housing and homelessness crisis, with a cost-of-living crisis imposing misery and hardship on working-class people and on the least well-off, and with people with disabilities being forced, as we speak, to organise protests in the run-in to Christmas over what has been done to them in the most recent budget, which is taking €1,000 a year off them. The other side of the coin, and this is the so-called political centres legacy, is that under Deputy Donohoe's ministerships profits for the corporations have quadrupled. While people who are poor are suffering, to the extent of not even having a roof over their heads, the profits of the big corporations, the landlords and the vulture funds have gone through the roof. Energy companies are recording record profits while elderly people will be terrified in the coming days as this cold snap hits, afraid to turn on the heating because they cannot afford to pay the bills. They will not be getting a cost-of-living support during the Christmas period. Deputy Donohoe cannot escape responsibility for this legacy. The truth, I am sorry to say, is that the World Bank

is an institution of global capitalism that, frankly, has a pretty dire record. It is located in Washington DC where it lends out money to poor countries; demands austerity and privatisation; and, essentially, serves the interests of American and western big business, often at the expense of some of the poorest countries in the world.

On a personal level, I wish the Minister the best of luck but he knows we have very different views on what is good for this country and the need to radically change the priorities he has pursued.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** On behalf of Independent Ireland I extend my heartfelt congratulations to Paschal Donohoe on his appointment to the World Bank. This is an extraordinary achievement. I wish him and his family the very best, and the same to the Minister, Deputy McEntee; the Ministers of State, Deputies Naughton and Higgins; and the incoming Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. I congratulate them on their elevation to new offices.

While we acknowledge the service of Deputy Donohoe, we cannot ignore the legacy of the most recent budget for 2026. It was presented as sensible and protective of growth, yet for many families it fell short, with modest increases of €10 in weekly social welfare payments, €8 or €16 for child payments and €5 in the fuel allowance. There was no meaningful cost-of-living package and no changes to personal income taxes. Meanwhile, housing remains in crisis despite €5 billion in capital commitments. The minimum wage increase to €14.15 barely scratches the surface of inflationary pressures. There were no energy credits for families and pensioners, who are still choosing between heating and eating.

Disturbingly, buried in the recent budget is a significant, large unannounced measure, whereby the VAT rate on room hire, excluding hotel and guesthouse bedrooms, will increase from 13.5% to 23% on 1 January. This change, being introduced without clear communication, will impose a substantial financial burden on hospitality business. For example, one Cork hotel estimates it will cost approximately €25,000 annually if absorbed internally. To offset this, it would need to generate more than €120,000 additional gross revenue next year, a near impossible target in the current climate. This comes at a time when the minimum wage is set to rise by almost 5% and auto-enrolment for pensions is being introduced, adding further pressure to payroll costs. These combined measures place enormous strain on small hotels and rural businesses that are already struggling to remain viable. These establishments are not only commercial entities; they are pillars of their communities that support local events, charities and even political activities. Such hidden changes erode trust and fuel frustration among the electorate. At a time when transparency and fairness should be paramount, these stealth increases will leave a bitter taste among rural businesses across the country. It is no wonder people feel disillusioned when decisions of this nature are made without proper debate or disclosure.

I wanted to talk about the writ in relation to Galway West and Dublin Central but, unfortunately, I do not have time. It is hugely important we debate that issue here and that the Government calls immediate by-elections in both of those constituencies.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** Today comes as a slight surprise to me. After listening to the whispered conversations in the hallways for the past number of weeks, I suspected it might have been Micheál Martin resigning today rather than Paschal Donohoe.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** No chance of that.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** On a personal note, I wish Paschal well. He has been nothing but respectful, decent and honourable in our exchanges across the House in the short period I have been a Member of it. I offer my sincere best wishes to him, his family and his wife Justine as he takes up his new position as the managing director and chief knowledge officer of the World Bank. It is the second most senior role in the institution. It is an enormous position to achieve and one of which to be extremely proud. All of us Irish people should be proud an Irish politician achieved this. It is something of which we all need to be proud. I mean that most sincerely and genuinely.

We heard what is announced today and I personally wish everybody well. I have to say to the Tánaiste that he has an enormous job ahead of him. I noticed the Minister for Finance has resigned following the 120 questions I submitted over the weekend regarding Ulster Bank. I look forward to having the Tánaiste answer them all, in particular what was discussed in the Palace of Westminster on the report that came from the hidden financial credits and mis-selling of large financial funds in the British banking industry, including Ulster Bank, Royal Bank of Scotland, RBS, and Lloyds, which was reported at the Palace of Westminster last week. I am looking forward to his views on that. As the new Minister for Finance, I ask that he looks at energy credits and looks again at the cost of living and the difficulties we are having. We have seen the rise of the cost of living.

I sincerely wish the best to the newly appointed Ministers, including the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in her new role, and the new Minister, Deputy Naughton. I can assure Deputy Naughton that Noel Thomas is already knocking on doors in Galway. He is already talking to people. The Deputy should not worry at all about the constituency. Noel Thomas has it covered for Independent Ireland and there is no problem there.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** On a personal level, I wish Paschal Donohoe very well. Paschal Donohoe has always been a personable, friendly and amiable character in here. In the handful of times where I saw that approach change, it was clear that he was under serious pressure for serious reasons as well. There is no doubt that the particular roles Paschal has held have been tough jobs that have taken a lot of his time and effort. I wish him luck with this.

There is probably nobody happier in the House at the moment than Simon Harris. When he heard the news, he probably let out a sigh of relief that his erstwhile challenger to the leadership of Fine Gael has now left and there is no obvious challenger at this moment in time in Fine Gael.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I do not know about that. There are plenty.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** There are a good few.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is important to remember this in terms of a critique: Paschal has always communicated an air of fiscal responsibility and rectitude but the truth is radically different. There is absolutely no doubt that while in position, this Government became synonymous with waste and rip-off politics. From the national children's hospital to the bike shed, the Government has incinerated taxpayers' money on an industrial scale. In terms of the spending of taxpayers' money, it was a free for all. There were dozens of projects way out of line. Nobody enforced accountability, unfortunately, during that time.

In terms of costs for families, €1.9 billion in motor tax and VRT was collected last year. There was €4.1 billion collected in fuel taxes last year. Tolls were jacked up. Electric Ireland made super-normal profits, all the while nearly half a million families are in fuel poverty of some sort.

It is also clear that this particular announcement was a shock to the Government because the reshuffle is a dog's dinner. Usually in reshuffles, you remove Ministers who are not performing and there are many Ministers not performing here. The Minister, Deputy James Browne, is a Minister for housing in reverse at the moment. The Tánaiste has surfed through a number of different Departments from higher education to health, justice and foreign affairs.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** Defence and Taoiseach, too.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** His record in health includes the explosion of costs of the national children's hospital, the shocking collapse of CHI and the CervicalCheck scandal as well. In justice, he saw Garda numbers and morale fall to the floor. In his brief time - six months - in justice, he actually saw the immigration crisis go from bad to worse. The number of deportation orders overturned during his time increased massively.

**The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris):** I was only in justice for five months.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** For the Minister who could not count Covies, he is now in charge of the Department of Finance. Instead of accountability, we see promotion under this Government. In fairness to the Tánaiste, he was only in justice for six months. Incredibly, Helen McEntee was in that Department for far longer. We now have the Minister who, after the Dublin riots, walked while flanked by gardaí and said this city is safe.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** No, I did not.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** She is now in charge of the safety of the skies, the seas and everything below it.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** No, I did not. The Deputy should get his timelines and facts right.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** This is a jaded Government, a tired Government and it is time for it to go.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** Comhghairdeas leis an t-iarAire, an Teachta Donohoe, as a phost nua sa Bhanc Domhanda. I also congratulate the newly appointed Ministers. I may not have agreed with his team's style of play but there is no doubt that as part of the collective, the former Minister, Deputy Donohoe, has been an outstanding leader in finance and especially during the tough times. I would say he is the veritable Séamus Coleman of his team. However, in terms of this team, he looked and said, "We are not going to make the playoffs", so he took a different job.

**The Taoiseach:** Who is the Troy Parrott?

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** Unfortunately, we have no Troy Parrott or Katie McCabe in our team who will take us to the next level, moving forward. A year ago, at the start of this Government, I said it was kind of a Chappell Roan moment - good luck, babes - because in five years' time, I was going to say I hate to say it but I told you so. We are one year through that now. If there is not going to be another Fine Gael Taoiseach for a long time to come, after Simon Harris, the Government should grab the bull by the horns and say, "We are going to go out but let us go out with a bang. Let us show the spirit of the Ireland team on Sunday when we said we will just have to put three up front and try to make a real difference."

The Government has the opportunity to get rid of the Civil Service inertia and make real progress on housing, make us energy self-sufficient and improve our transport system but, as of now, all of the pundits are saying the Government does not have a hope in hell.

If I was in the shoes of mo chairde go léir, I would say go for it. The Government has four years and may not be in government for another ten years after that so it should make the tough decisions. The Deputies should not be afraid of losing their seats because maybe they will have to lose them to do what is required. That is the way Government happens.

**The Taoiseach:** Go for it.

Question put:

| The Dáil divided: Tá, 88; Níl, 69; Staon, 0. |                        |       |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                    | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.         |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.          |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.        |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard. |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.           |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.          |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.         |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Cairns, Holly.         |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Carthy, Matt.          |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Clarke, Sorca.         |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Collins, Michael.      |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Conway-Walsh, Rose.    |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Coppinger, Ruth.       |       |
| Cahill, Michael.                             | Cronin, Réada.         |       |

|                             |                           |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Callaghan, Catherine.       | Cullinane, David.         |  |
| Calleary, Dara.             | Cummins, Jen.             |  |
| Canney, Seán.               | Daly, Pa.                 |  |
| Carrigy, Micheál.           | Doherty, Pearse.          |  |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer. | Donnelly, Paul.           |  |
| Chambers, Jack.             | Ellis, Dessie.            |  |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.       | Farrelly, Aidan.          |  |
| Clendennen, John.           | Fitzmaurice, Michael.     |  |
| Collins, Niall.             | Gannon, Gary.             |  |
| Connolly, John.             | Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.   |  |
| Cooney, Joe.                | Gould, Thomas.            |  |
| Crowe, Cathal.              | Graves, Ann.              |  |
| Cummins, John.              | Guirke, Johnny.           |  |
| Currie, Emer.               | Healy, Seamus.            |  |
| Daly, Martin.               | Hearne, Rory.             |  |
| Dempsey, Aisling.           | Kenny, Eoghan.            |  |
| Devlin, Cormac.             | Kenny, Martin.            |  |
| Dillon, Alan.               | Kerrane, Claire.          |  |
| Dolan, Albert.              | Lawless, Paul.            |  |
| Donohoe, Paschal.           | Lawlor, George.           |  |
| Dooley, Timmy.              | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.   |  |
| Feighan, Frankie.           | McDonald, Mary Lou.       |  |
| Fleming, Sean.              | McGettigan, Donna.        |  |
| Foley, Norma.               | McGuinness, Conor D.      |  |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.    | Mitchell, Denise.         |  |
| Geoghegan, James.           | Murphy, Paul.             |  |
| Harkin, Marian.             | Mythen, Johnny.           |  |
| Harris, Simon.              | Nash, Ged.                |  |
| Healy-Rae, Danny.           | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.         | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| Heneghan, Barry.            | Nolan, Carol.             |  |
| Heydon, Martin.             | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | O'Flynn, Ken.             |  |
| Lawless, James.             | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| Martin, Micheál.            | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.   |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| McEntee, Helen.             | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| McGrath, Mattie.            | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| McGuinness, John.           | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | Sherlock, Marie.          |  |

|                             |                     |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|--|
| Moynihan, Michael.          | Smith, Duncan.      |  |
| Moynihan, Shane.            | Stanley, Brian.     |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. | Tóibín, Peadar.     |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            | Wall, Mark.         |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Ward, Charles.      |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Ward, Mark.         |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Whitmore, Jennifer. |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           |                     |  |
| O'Connor, James.            |                     |  |
| O'Dea, Willie.              |                     |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          |                     |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         |                     |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.              |                     |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          |                     |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    |                     |  |
| O'Sullivan, Pádraig.        |                     |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |                     |  |
| Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.          |                     |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |                     |  |
| Richmond, Neale.            |                     |  |
| Roche, Peter.               |                     |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.             |                     |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                     |  |
| Timmins, Edward.            |                     |  |
| Toole, Gillian.             |                     |  |
| Troy, Robert.               |                     |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Mary Butler; Níl, Deputies Duncan Smith and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 4.03 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.20 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 4.03 p.m. and resumed at 5.20 p.m.*

### Ukraine: Statements

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney):** For almost 1,400 days, Ukraine has been subjected to an armed aggression, the likes of which had not darkened our Continent in decades. The actions of the Russian Government in invading the territory of a sovereign, independent state are an affront to humanity, conducted with flagrant disregard for the UN Charter and for international law. In the course of its military aggression, Russia has killed thousands of Ukrainians, occupied parts of the country, devastated towns and cities, deported thousands of Ukrainian children, has forced over 14 million people from their homes and has deepened the scourge of global hunger.

Russia intentionally cripples Ukrainian infrastructure and tortures its servicemen. It has razed historic sites to the ground and, simply put, has sought to extinguish any Ukrainian future from this very earth. Russian drones and missiles target Ukrainian cities on a regular basis. Swarms of up to 800 drones per night terrorise the people of Kyiv and other cities. These are not the actions of a country interested in peace.

In the face of brutal adversity, Ukrainians continue to demonstrate outstanding courage, resolve and determination. Today, I would like to honour their heroic efforts to defend their country and their freedom. Given our own history, nobody from Ireland could not feel a strong resonance with a people trying to defend their country from an imperialist oppressor that claims a right to subdue its neighbouring people and destroy their identity.

Ukrainians have done nothing to bring down this war on their heads. They deserve the right we all claim to determine their own future, in peace and security. President Putin seeks to contort history such that an aggressor is somehow a victim, the imperialist is liberator and the oppressor is the oppressed.

We cannot accept this tearing of the fabric of the international order and this perverse inversion of reality. We must return to the facts. Russia's full-scale invasion was an act of unprovoked and unjustified aggression by an expansionist power against its neighbour.

In 1945, the United Nations collectively agreed to say, "Never again" to the atrocities that follow from expansionist violence, yet now such atrocities have returned in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan and in other conflicts. We cannot resign ourselves to inaction. We must not begin to normalise this inhumanity that the United Nations worked so hard to consign to history. We are seeing the rapid erosion of the fundamental basis for multilateralism with this conflict and with it threats to the integrity and credibility of the UN Charter itself. The example of a permanent member of the Security Council privileging imperial ambitions over global security threatens all of us and it threatens our collective future. It calls into question the capacity for the peaceful settlement of disputes and frays the common threads of our peaceful co-existence as member states of the United Nations. In this, the 80th year of the UN's founding, Russian actions in Ukraine raise profound questions and challenges for the international community.

If Russia is allowed to prevail, seizing territory it has no legal right to and causing untold death and destruction with impunity, this will simply further embolden it and give a green light for others to attempt the same. What happens in Ukraine reverberates across the globe. Such unprecedented challenges to the international rules-based order have necessarily been met with an unprecedented response. Ireland has been at the forefront of these efforts. At the United Nations, Ireland along with our EU partners, has supported every General Assembly resolution in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including successful action to exclude Russia from the Human Rights Council.

During our term on the United Nations Security Council, Ireland delivered consistent, principled and powerful criticism of Russia's war and defence of the UN Charter and the people of Ukraine. Ireland will continue to use our position and voice in the UN and in other international fora to support Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and the right to live in peace.

As Ukraine withstands Russian bombardment, it is our responsibility as a democracy to stand with them. In defending their nation, Ukrainians are also defending the universal principles

that underpin our multilateral system: the rights of all people to live peacefully within their own borders and according to their own values and choices. This is why Ireland, together with the European Union and its member states, have mobilised unprecedented levels of support for Ukraine since the start of the Russian war of aggression. Since February 2022, the EU and its member states have provided almost €144 billion in support for Ukraine. This has been in the form of macro-financial assistance, budgetary support, emergency assistance, crisis response and humanitarian aid, as well as military assistance.

In February 2024, political agreement was reached on a €50 billion financial support package for Ukraine. The Ukraine facility will make available up to €50 billion in grants and loans until 2027 to cater for Ukraine's immediate needs, recovery and modernisation on its path towards the EU. Since February 2022, Ireland has committed over €380 million in political, humanitarian, economic and non-lethal military support to Ukraine.

In response to Russia's illegal aggression, the European Union has adopted unprecedented sanctions. The EU first imposed Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia in 2014 in response to its illegal annexation of Crimea and its role in supporting separatists in Donbas. Since the full-scale invasion, the EU has adopted a total of 19 sanctions packages against Russia. We must continue to exert maximum pressure on Russia and limit its ability to wage its war of aggression against Ukraine. A broad range of sectoral sanctions have been put in place, including measures targeting Russia's military, technology, transport and energy sectors. Ireland welcomed the adoption of the 19th package of sanctions against Russia in October and will continue to support the use of sanctions to pressure Russia. Together these measures are having an impact, making it harder for Russia to access battlefield goods and generate revenue to pay for its illegal war.

The decision by the European Council to open accession negotiations with Ukraine offers the prospect of a brighter future for the Ukrainian people. This year's enlargement report confirmed that Ukraine has made significant progress on the path to membership in the European Union and reflects the results of systemic reforms implemented, despite all the challenges of the war. Ireland strongly supports Ukraine's path towards EU membership. We will work to advance it under our Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2026.

Ireland is a militarily neutral country. However, as we have said many times, we are not politically or morally neutral in the face of violations of international law and war crimes; quite the opposite. Our position is informed by the principles that drive our foreign policy: support for international human rights law, for humanitarian law and for a rules-based international order, and the rights of all countries to choose their own path.

We are not neutral when Russia disregards all of these principles. We will continue to stand with Ukraine because Ukraine is fighting not only for its own survival, but in defence of European security and European values. Ireland recognises that its continued support for Ukraine is a necessity, not a choice. We are playing our part by providing non-lethal military support to Ukraine.

Through the Department of Defence, we continue to provide direct military support-in-kind. In June, five air defence radar systems and a fire tender were delivered to Ukraine. A further donation of 34 vehicles, including ambulances, was delivered in two convoys in early September. Three Reacher bomb disposal robots were delivered to the Ukraine Defense

Contact Group, UDCG, demining coalition in mid September. The Defence Forces will deliver a further training module of basic training to Ukrainian armed forces personnel via EUMAM Ukraine. This will take to 23 the total number of modules delivered by Irish personnel.

Through the framework of the European Defence Agency's EU SatCom Market project, we provided support to Ukraine in respect to provision of satellite communications equipment at a value of €1.36 million. Ireland continues to contribute to the European Peace Facility, EPF, for non-lethal military support to Ukraine. At EU level, the release of the majority of remaining committed funding under the EPF is currently blocked. To date this year, we have committed €100 million in bilateral non-lethal military support to Ukraine. In July, €10 million each was provided to the UDCG coalitions on demining and IT support, led by Lithuania-Iceland and Estonia-Luxembourg, respectively. The remaining €80 million is being used primarily for the procurement of non-lethal elements of air defence in co-operation with EU member states with whom Ireland has agreed procurement partnerships for this purpose. The Government is firmly committed to continuing this strong support for Ukraine and expects to announce a further substantial package of non-lethal support shortly.

It is important to remember that while this war is being fought on Ukrainian territory, it is also a war on the Continent of Europe and against a country aspiring to join the European Union. It is perhaps easy to look eastward and believe the fires of war burning in Ukraine will never reach our shores and that distance is protection. Our commitment to a values-based foreign policy, multilateralism and a policy of military neutrality does not insulate us from the impacts of a rapidly changing and volatile international security environment that has become the new reality across Europe.

Russia's increasingly provocative and reckless campaign of hybrid activity is raising concerns and tensions across Europe. Russia's war of aggression must come to an end. We continue to call for a ceasefire to allow for meaningful negotiations to occur, negotiations that respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Regrettably, instead of agreeing to sit at the negotiating table, Russia chooses to escalate its attacks on Ukraine. I call on Russia to cease these brutal attacks. We will work alongside the US and European and other international partners in support of efforts for peace. This is not just critical for peace in Ukraine, but also for Ireland, for Europe and for the wider international community.

It is more important than ever that Ireland and our EU partners demonstrate our continuing solidarity to Ukraine in the face of Russia's aggression. Russia's aggression extends well beyond Ukraine. We have recently seen the airspace of our EU partners violated by drones and planes. The Government has strongly condemned these activities. Through its sustained pursuit of hybrid campaigns, Russia is a major threat to stability, democracy and social cohesion throughout Europe and beyond. These activities represent an attempt to divide member states, in particular in relation to support for Ukraine. Like other member states, Ireland is susceptible to these malicious acts, which include disruption to critical infrastructure, cyberattacks, spreading disinformation and attempts to interfere in electoral processes.

The Government takes the risks posed by these activities very seriously and we are responding. We are actively and constructively engaging in the development of EU policies aimed at combating hybrid threats, particularly Russia's campaign of hybrid activity against the EU and its member states. We support the full use of all means available to prevent, deter and respond to Russia's hybrid activities, including through sanctions. We will continue to

work with our EU partners to strengthen our collective resilience. Domestically, the Government is implementing a range of relevant measures at national level to combat hybrid threats from state and non-state actors, including Russia, its proxies and aligned actors. This includes a substantial increase in investment in the National Cyber Security Centre, publication of a national counter-disinformation strategy, legislation enhancing election security through the Electoral Commission, the commencement of legislation on third country investment screening and control of exports.

The Department of Defence will publish Ireland's first national maritime security strategy by the end of this year. We are also building up Ireland's national capability to identify, mitigate and counter hybrid threats through our membership of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki.

Internal repression in Russia has increased even further since Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Mr. Putin's regime systematically represses opposition politicians, civil society organisations, independent media and other critical voices with the use of repressive legislation and politically motivated prison sentences. That is why, when he observes the rigours of debate and forceful civic engagement in the EU and democracies around the world, he concludes that we are divided and democracy is weak. When he invaded Ukraine, he thought Europe and its transatlantic partners would abandon Ukraine. He miscalculated and he is seeing it backfire. The EU and our international partners are united in our resolve to end this war and the threat it poses to our collective security.

In September 2024, then Taoiseach, Deputy Simon Harris and President Zelenskyy signed a comprehensive bilateral agreement on support and co-operation between Ireland and Ukraine. This agreement sends a clear signal to Russia that we will not waver in the face of the ongoing brutal aggression in Ukraine and signifies Ireland's determination to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. The Government's focus remains on achieving a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, a peace that respects Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the principles of the UN Charter and international law.

Russia's war of aggression must come to an end. We continue to call for a ceasefire to allow meaningful negotiations to occur, negotiations that respect Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Regrettably, instead of agreeing to sit at the negotiating table, Russia chooses to escalate its attacks on Ukraine. I call on Russia to cease these brutal attacks. We will work alongside the US and European and other international partners in support of efforts for peace. This is not just critical for peace in Ukraine but also for Ireland, Europe and the wider international community. It is more important than ever that Ireland and our EU partners demonstrate our continuing solidarity with Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression.

**The Taoiseach:** I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this important debate as we approach the fourth year of Russia's full-scale illegal war of aggression against its peaceful neighbour, Ukraine. It is essential that we never lose sight of the fact that Russia, in a fundamental violation of the UN Charter and international law, launched an unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine, a European country and fellow United Nations member state. Each day Russia continues its brutal war against Ukraine and its occupation of Ukrainian territory is another day that Russia violates international law and makes the world, in particular Europe, a less secure, more dangerous place. How Europe and the international community

respond will have far-reaching consequences for Ukraine, European security and the future of the rules-based international order.

Russia has continued its full-scale aggression without pause since 24 February 2022. Since then, indescribable suffering has been inflicted upon the people of Ukraine. Millions have been forced to flee their homeland and millions more are internally displaced. Hundreds of thousands have been killed with thousands more, including children, forcibly removed, tortured or arbitrarily imprisoned by Russian forces. Villages, towns and even entire cities have been completely destroyed in the fighting that continues unabated. Ukraine and the Ukrainian people are valiantly withstanding a massive recurring Russian onslaught. Nightly drone and missile strikes have intensified. These aerial bombardments are indiscriminate and do not distinguish between military targets and civilian infrastructure. Their sole objective is to impose terror, inflict suffering and break the spirit of the Ukrainian people.

Yet Ukraine and its people fight on, exercising their right under the UN Charter to defend themselves. Each day they continue their heroic efforts to defend their country and the fundamental freedoms that we in Ireland and across Europe hold dear, particularly the right of all people to live peacefully within their own borders without fear of being invaded. I witnessed the outstanding courage, resolve and determination of Ukrainians first-hand when I visited Kyiv in 2022 and 2023. I pay tribute again to the people of Ukraine for their bravery. I have paid this tribute directly to President Zelenskyy and in my latest phone call with him in September, I expressed my, and the Irish people's, solidarity with the people of Ukraine. I invited President Zelenskyy to visit Ireland to witness first-hand this solidarity and I look forward to welcoming him in the near future.

Almost four years on from Russia's full-scale invasion, tragically, it seems that we are no closer to peace. Russia is counting on us to grow tired and become distracted by competing priorities but it will be disappointed. Alongside our European Union partners, Ireland's support for the people and government of Ukraine is steadfast. Providing this continued support for Ukraine is not only the right thing to do but it is in our fundamental national interest. What happens in Ukraine today will shape the world we live in tomorrow. That is why Ireland's support for Ukraine remains as strong today as it was on day one of Russia's invasion. We will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

The European Union has been steadfast in its solidarity with Ukraine since the first day of this terrible war. We are working with our partners in the EU to provide real and tangible assistance to Ukraine and to respond substantially to Russia's illegal invasion. This commitment was a major focus of October's European Council meeting, where European leaders were briefed by President Zelenskyy on recent developments in Ukraine, including Russia's escalation of strikes on civilians and civilian infrastructure. In response, my fellow leaders and I reconfirmed the EU's unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. The EU is providing, in co-ordination with like-minded partners and allies, comprehensive political, financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and its people.

The EU is also working to show Russia that there is no positive outcome to the war. Through unprecedented EU sanctions, we are having an impact. Russia is finding it harder to access battlefield equipment and to generate revenue to pay for its illegal war. Russia must be held accountable for its actions and should have to pay for the destruction it has caused. There must

be an economic cost to such flagrant violations of international law. This cost must also act as a deterrent against Russia or any other country contemplating any future violation of the UN Charter and international law. We therefore support the European Union's initiative for a reparations loan to Ukraine using immobilised Russian assets.

We all want this war to end but it must end on the basis of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, one that respects Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity and the principles of the UN Charter and international law. It is also vital that Ukraine's security is protected in the long term. That means strong, credible guarantees that ensure Ukraine can defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity to avoid a repetition of the past. Despite sustained US and European diplomatic efforts towards peace and Ukraine's readiness to pursue it, Russia is intent on escalating the war.

The obvious reality is that President Putin continues each day to choose violence and destruction over peace, disregarding alternatives to its chosen path of needless invasion, war and further bloodshed. Time and again, the international community has offered Putin the chance to stop the killing, agree to a ceasefire and pursue peace and time and time again, he has refused. Actions speak louder than words. It is for Russia now to show through its actions a willingness to achieve peace by halting its brutal attacks and agreeing to a full and unconditional ceasefire. It can do so at any time. Now is the time to increase the pressure on Russia and to redouble efforts to secure a ceasefire.

As winter comes upon us, Russia is relentlessly targeting Ukraine's energy facilities with drone and missile attacks, directly killing people in the process and imperilling the safety and security of all Ukrainians. Access to the most basic needs, including water, shelter and protection services, continues to be extremely challenging for many. If we, Ukraine's allies and friends, do not step up and support its efforts to safeguard its critical infrastructure, more people will be displaced. Millions could be forced to leave their homes simply to stay alive. The humanitarian and regional consequences will be immense. In this context, it is more important than ever that we bolster support for Ukraine in every way we can.

Since 2022, Ireland has provided more than €273 million in bilateral assistance to Ukraine. This includes €173 million in humanitarian and stabilisation assistance and an additional €100 million in non-lethal military support for Ukraine, which was announced last March. Among the projects that Ireland is currently supporting are the construction of underground clinics to safely provide services at two Kharkiv maternity hospitals, the building of civic protection shelters and the provision of school meals to children in front-line districts. We are also providing financial support to carry out critical repair work to Ukraine's war-damaged energy infrastructure. Our support for Ukraine will continue when this war ends and Ukraine can begin its recovery and reconstruction.

Russia's full-scale invasion triggered the largest displacement crisis in Europe in decades, with millions displaced and in need of continued, life-saving support. Since February 2022, Ireland has granted temporary protection to over 120,000 Ukrainians forced to leave their homeland and seek sanctuary here, one of the highest *per capita* rates in Europe. We have invested significantly in providing a safe haven for Ukrainian refugees. Some sought refuge for a while before returning home. Some moved on to other countries. Some remain and are making an invaluable contribution, enriching our society and culture.

Many have been taken into homes and communities across the State, and I want to take a moment to thank the people of Ireland for their generosity in offering safe haven to so many Ukrainians. To the Ukrainians who are here, this is your home for as long you need it. I have no doubt that, in time, you will play a crucial role in rebuilding your country when it is once again safe to do so.

Russia's war of aggression continues to have far-reaching consequences beyond the borders of Ukraine. It has compounded an already fragile global food security situation, with major implications for food and agricultural commodity prices. Russia continues to weaponise hunger by targeting Ukraine's grain and critical infrastructure. This not only inflicts suffering on Ukrainian people, but also has a disproportionate impact on those most vulnerable to food insecurity around the world. Despite these significant challenges, the Ukrainian people have demonstrated their commitment to maintaining Ukraine as one of the world's top agricultural producers. Ukraine's efforts to remain a top grain exporter help to defend us from global hunger.

When I visited Kyiv in July 2022, I had the honour of laying flowers at the memorial to the Holodomor, Ukraine's catastrophic famine, which took place in the 1930s. Ireland recognises that the resulting trauma of that famine remains and is deeply felt by the Ukrainian people, shaping a profound empathy for those who suffer from hunger today. As a champion of global efforts to reduce hunger and starvation, rooted in our own historical experience of famine, Ireland will continue to work with Ukraine and our EU and international partners to meet the needs of people and communities affected by food insecurity. I am pleased to announce that Ireland will provide €2 million to the food from Ukraine programme, which will be launched at a food security summit in Kyiv tomorrow, and which will contribute to tackling global hunger and improving child nutrition.

We have read and heard horrific reports of gross and systematic violations of human rights by Russia. One of Russia's most brutal and egregious crimes has been the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children from their homes. Ireland is a member of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children. In September, I participated in a meeting of the coalition at the UN General Assembly, where I expressed Ireland's support for the efforts to ensure the safe return of Ukrainian children. Any peaceful resolution to Russia's war must involve the return of all forcibly transferred people, including children. This is an appalling act and such actions amount to war crimes. We must work to hold those responsible to account.

Ireland supports the continued investigations of the International Criminal Court in Ukraine and welcomes the historic progress made towards establishing the special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine. We are actively engaging with our partners in the Council of Europe to ensure that the special tribunal can be operational as quickly as possible.

This war and the threat posed by Russia are not only an existential threat to Ukraine, but a major challenge to the security we value so greatly. It is more important than ever that Europe and the United States continue to work together to achieve a just and lasting peace for Ukraine. A just and lasting peace must bring stability and security. It must respect international law, including the principles of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity and that international borders must not be changed by force. Ireland has always insisted that an end to the war must be obtained through diplomatic means, with the full participation of Ukraine in

any peace talks. We welcome the efforts of all partners, including US President Donald Trump, towards that goal.

As Russia continues to refuse to come to the table, the world must increase economic and political pressure on it until it does. Those of us who have joined the coalition of the willing in support of Ukraine will stand with Ukraine, shoulder-to-shoulder, for as long as it takes. With our European and international partners, we will strengthen and tighten our sanctions and work to cut off Russia's energy revenues, the lifeblood of its war machine. We will also work to increase our support to Ukraine to strengthen its defences and protect Ukraine's critical infrastructure. We will put in place the security guarantees that Ukraine needs to underpin any future peace agreement. Ireland believes that, ultimately, the greatest security guarantee that we can offer to Ukraine is membership of the European Union, the most successful peace project in the history of this Continent. I have been a strong early supporter of Ukraine's pathway to membership of the European Union. As a Government, we strongly support Ukraine's application for EU membership and are determined to advance it under our Presidency of the European Union next year.

The world has been humbled by the strength and resilience of the people of Ukraine. While the current challenges may seem insurmountable, we must not falter in our resolve. We recognise that our continued support for Ukraine is a necessity, not a choice. That is why Ireland stands with Ukraine now and in the future. Go raibh míle maith agaibh agus *slava Ukraini*.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond):** I join both the Taoiseach and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, in commending the people of Ukraine on their brave defence of their homeland and, equally, to utterly condemn Russia for its brutal and illegal war. Let there be no equivocation: there is one single aggressor and one sole reason for this brutal conflict, which is the madness of the dictatorship of Vladimir Putin that is driving this war. It is a war that is having an extremely material impact on every home, every household and every family that we represent in Dáil Éireann, in Ireland, but equally in so many homes, households and livelihoods across Europe and, most perversely, in the poorest countries of the world, which rely on the energy and food that would ordinarily come from Ukraine, but of course we see energy and food being used as weapons of war by the Russian war machine.

Let it not be lost on us that we are also seeing increasing activities of hybrid warfare emanating from Russia, as alluded to by the Minister of State, which is having a direct impact. That can be drones flying over European territory, criminal hacking of European systems or the sheer amount of disinformation being added to our political discourse here in Ireland and across the European Union. The Taoiseach and I both find ourselves on Russian sanctions lists, a deliberate act of provocation by the Russian embassy, located, sadly, in my constituency. That is why it is imperative that this brutal war be ended as soon as possible on terms that are true to what Ukraine stands for, in protecting its sovereign territory and independence, recognising the importance of the UN Charter and making sure that it dissuades those who see Russia's actions as being viable options for their own nationalistic goals or indeed encouraging Russia. If it is allowed to run amok continuously across Ukraine, where is next?

We must note that there has been tangible, real Irish support to the people of Ukraine, as alluded to by both the Taoiseach and Minister of State. People have opened their homes and communities to more than 118,000 Ukrainians since this outbreak of this iteration of the war. There has been very real humanitarian support and real, clear support from this Government for non-lethal efforts. I question anyone who says that the provision of training to de-mine Ukraine to stop women and children from being blown up in Ukraine by Russian mines. I question anyone who says that those are things that we should not be supporting. There is a peaceful future for the people of Ukraine and it must be a future that we in Ireland support through our absolute support, as the Taoiseach alluded to, for making sure that Ukraine has a speedy accession to the European Union.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Geall le ceithre bliana ó shin, rinne Vladimir Putin agus an Rúis ionsaí uafásach ar an Úcráin, agus is é "uafásach" an focal ceart agus cuí le n-úsáid. Ina dhiaidh sin, lean an choimhlint agus cogadh is mó san Eoraip le 80 bliain anuas, agus go leor teifigh ag teacht as sin. Deirim arís gur ionsaí ar chearta agus ar saoirse muintir na hÚcráine, agus ar chearta na hÚcráine mar Stáit agus mar náisiúin, a bhí anseo. Léiríú ab ea é ar an tuairim atá ag Rialtas na Rúise gurb é cumhacht an rud céanna le ceart, agus gur féidir le cumhacht míleata lámh in uachtar a bheith aige ar dhaonnacht.

Nearly four years ago, Vladimir Putin's Russia launched a brutal war of aggression against its neighbour, Ukraine. "Brutal" is truly the word to use. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in the largest land conflict and greatest displacement of people on the European Continent in 80 years. I reiterate that Russia's attack on and bombardment of the Ukrainian people is an attack on sovereignty, peace and the right of a nation to be sovereign, independent and free. It is a vicious and violent expression of the dead-end belief that might is right and that military power can dominate humanity.

I first want to touch on the issue of the huge number of civilian casualties in this conflict, which remains considerably high and perhaps does not get the attention that it ought to. I reference the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, which highlights that civilian casualties in October 2025 remain high, with at least 148 killed and 929 injured, similar to the numbers in September and August. Most deaths and injuries, at about 65%, occurred near the front line. As in the previous month, the vast majority of civilian casualties, 97%, occurred in areas under the control of the government of Ukraine. October saw emergency power cuts across multiple regions of Ukraine, driven by the Russian Federation's continued region-specific attacks and renewed large-scale strikes on energy and infrastructure. A considerable part of its strategy has been attacking civilian infrastructure, including energy and water, and the obvious impact that has on the quality of life, living conditions and humanitarian situation of the people of Ukraine.

Total civilian casualties from January to October 2025 are 27% higher than during the same period last year and the number of casualties for the first ten months of 2025 has already exceeded the total for all of 2024. These are shocking figures. It is extremely concerning and it points to an escalation of the situation of the sheer scale of civilian harm we are seeing in Ukraine. Unfortunately, the situation is only getting worse. We must remember that behind all those figures are real men, women and children whose lives have been shattered, destroyed and turned upside-down. Tá pobal iomlán tar éis dul tríd rudaí uafásacha. Tá go leor daoine

tar éis baill teaghlaigh a chailliúint, idir deartháireacha, iníonacha, uncailí, cairde, pé rud é. Is dócha go mbeidh an fhulaingt sin ann fós i ndiaidh deireadh an chogaidh, pé uair a tharlaíonn sé.

I am reminded of the horrific scenes we watched on our television screens in February 2022 when this brutal war began. I remember the gut-wrenching feeling as we watched, appalled, as families, women and children, walked through the cold for hours, climbed on and off packed trains and trucks, forced to flee for their lives, uncertain what their future held. The people of Ireland showed great solidarity and their hearts went out to everyone affected.

Since then, as we know, millions of Ukrainian people have been forced to leave their homeland. I acknowledge the people in Ireland who have done what they can to support the Ukrainian people who arrived here. In spite of this and the situation that is faced by the people of Ukraine, ordinary civilians in Ukraine have persevered, shown immense courage and resilience, continued their everyday lives and kept their country going despite the severe challenges and brutality that they have faced.

6 o'clock

They are faced with incredible challenges and attacks that greatly impact their ability to do the basic things, such as provide education, healthcare, heating and water distribution, and just get on with day-to-day living.

There is no doubt that the Russian Federation and Vladimir Putin himself significantly underestimated Ukraine and the resolve of its people, which has been clearly demonstrated since the war broke out in February 2022. Since then, the attacks have only become fiercer and more cynical. Ukraine's energy infrastructure has come under severe attack. There have been numerous large-scale, co-ordinated attacks over the course of this conflict, which has created a serious electricity deficit and difficulties for ordinary people. There is a particular danger in relation to attacks on the nuclear facilities at Zaporizhzhia and Chernobyl. There is no question that what we have seen in locations such as Bucha, Mariupol and elsewhere has been barbarism on the part of the Russian Federation. There have been completely unacceptable and despicable attacks on the Ukrainian people.

Russia's war also extends beyond the destruction of civilian and critical infrastructure and murder. It affects the lives of countless Ukrainian families through the reported forcible deportation of children. I pay tribute to the work done by the Ukrainian ambassador in recent years in articulating, with great force, passion and clarity, the situation of Ukrainian people at home and in Ireland. At the foreign affairs committee recently, she outlined the horrific situation of the forcible abduction of children. Thousands of children have been illegally transferred and, in some instances, adopted or conscripted into the Russian military from Ukraine. On that occasion, the ambassador told the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade:

Their identities are falsified, their ties to Ukraine severed and their futures put in jeopardy. These actions amount to a systematic and unprecedented genocide, targeting the very future of the Ukrainian people. Russia attacks the very essence of childhood itself to erase Ukrainian identity. The International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, a landmark move underscoring the moral and legal gravity

of these crimes. ... Those who have adopted and hidden Ukrainian children under false pretences must also be held accountable.

We have heard that the confirmed number is over 20,000 but the real figure could be multiples of this for children who were abducted and forcibly displaced to Russia. It is heartbreaking to hear the reports of parents who have lost their children, who were taken under the pretext of summer camps in the occupied territories and moved deeper into regions of Russia where their parents cannot find them. I am not sure this gets the attention that it ought to in this country. It is a crime that is difficult to comprehend. It simply does not bear thinking about.

The Irish people have been clear on whose side they stand. For 45 months, the courageous people of Ukraine have stood against the Russian onslaught and the brutal invasion. We hope peace may be delivered, although when and on what terms we do not know. On that day, there will be a need to support the Ukrainian people in rebuilding their country. Unfortunately, it is clear that Russia is not interested in peace at this moment in time. The Irish people have supported the Ukrainian people in the wake of this invasion. I reiterate Sinn Féin's solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

Táimid soiléir gur sáraíodh an dlí idirnáisiúnta ar an gceist seo. We are clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a blatant breach of international law. It is full-scale aggression that has been defined by the potential war crimes committed by the Russian military against innocent people. We call for a co-ordinated and concerted effort by the international community to secure an end to the hostilities and bring about peace. However, that peace needs to be on the basis of a just settlement for the people of Ukraine that respects Ukraine's rights. Ireland must use its voice to the greatest extent possible to achieve and support such an end.

Ireland remains a militarily neutral country but that does not mean we are politically neutral. We are clear that this is a war of aggression and that the Russian Federation is the aggressor. It is clear that, at this time, the Russian Federation is paying mere lip service, if even that, to peace negotiations. In my view, it is incumbent on the international community to leverage greater pressure on Russia to come to the negotiating table and deliver a potential peace, but a peace that respects the rights of the people of Ukraine.

To conclude, it has been nearly four years since the commencement of the brutal war in Ukraine. When we have had statements to mark the anniversary of the war, we have all hoped not to have to mark another year. Unfortunately, that is the case, and the people of Ukraine have been let down in that regard. We must do whatever we can at the Irish level to use our voice internationally for peace and to show solidarity with Ukraine. We must ensure that if peace comes, it respects the rights of the people of Ukraine and their territorial integrity.

**Deputy Ann Graves:** The Irish people stand in solidarity with Ukraine. We have actively supported the Ukrainian people since the Russian invasion in February 2022. This illegal invasion has caused huge instability in Europe. The trauma of this war has moved way beyond the borders of Ukraine and Russia. The incursion of Russian drones into Poland's airspace is completely unacceptable, reckless and provocative. It is a further example of a Russian Government that is intent on provocation and destabilisation in the region. It is a breach of international law and must be taken with the utmost seriousness. The Russian Government

should stop interfering in the airspace of other countries. Furthermore, it should end its war of aggression in Ukraine and engage in meaningful peace talks.

Since March 2022, 5.6 million people have fled Ukraine. Almost 140,000 Ukrainians fled to Ireland seeking sanctuary from the war in their homeland. Many want to return home as soon as peace breaks out but over 80,000 have remained here, making Ireland their home.

Sinn Féin utterly condemns Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Putin's invasion brought the horrors of war back to the centre of Europe, something previous generations hoped they would never see again. Like all wars, the war in Ukraine will have to come to an end. Sinn Féin calls for a co-ordinated and concerted effort by the international community to secure an end to the conflict. The world must put the same effort into making peace as has gone into making war. Ukraine, Russia, the United States, the EU and the UN must play a role in bringing this conflict to an end. This will require putting the interests of the people of the region above other geopolitical interests, including the profit-motivated interests of the armaments industries. These negotiations must include Ukraine. There can be nothing agreed without the consent of Kyiv. Ireland must use its position as a neutral state to aid these efforts.

The war in Ukraine is taking a terrible toll on the people of the region. Total civilian casualties from January to October 2025 are 27% higher than during the same period last year. Today, the Ukrainian Government confirmed that as many soldiers have deserted the army as are in the entire Ukrainian army. Security forces are rounding up men to force them to fight at the front. It is time to reiterate our call for a sustainable, permanent and just outcome to the war through a negotiated peace settlement.

The cost of this war is paid in human misery. Those who suffer the most have no control over the war itself. Siegfried Sassoon's "Base Details" paints the picture: those who make the decisions about war do so from the safety of bunkers, far removed from the front line. Sadly, this applies to war in Ukraine as much as it did during the First World War, when the poem was written. As we look around the world, we see the terrible cost to civilians during wars, particularly women and children. In the genocide in Gaza, the war in Sudan and the war here in Europe, it is civilians who carry the burden of casualties, as well as the decision to try to flee the warzones.

Today, the message from the Dáil is clear. Ireland stands for peace with justice. We must lead the demands for negotiations, and Ireland must be prepared to use its influence to facilitate those negotiations. Our own history shows that conflict, no matter how intractable it appears, can only be resolved through talks and negotiations. In fact, our peace process proves it is only through talks that the seeds of peace can be sown. Current conflicts in Ukraine and Sudan, and the ongoing genocide in Gaza, are heartbreaking. These conflicts must be brought to a just resolution. Sadly, bullets and bombs make huge profits for the warmongers. Only yesterday, Germany resumed exporting weapons to Israel, having partially suspended their export in August this year. By March 2024, the US and EU had supplied a combined total of €246 billion in military aid to Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russia had spent an estimated €215 billion on the war in Ukraine. Sinn Féin and the Irish people oppose these conflicts and those profiteering from them. We want a Europe in peace and a world where peace, prosperity and stability reign.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** Like many of us, I remember when we woke one morning in February 2022 to learn Russia had invaded Ukraine. In the first week, everyone wondered

what would happen and believed the Russians would roll over the Ukrainians very quickly. What has happened has proved otherwise, and it is certainly a tribute to the resilience and courage of the Ukrainian people that they have held up for so long against what would always have been considered a huge global military power and that they have been able to fight back and hold the line. Of course, they have done that with the support of many, none more than the people of Ireland, who welcomed thousands of them here. In the first few weeks, many of us worked with people we knew or got to know from Ukraine to help to bring families here, accommodate them and work with them. Many of those people have become part of communities in different parts of the country and have been a huge asset. Many I have got to know have told horrific stories of things that happened to their families back home. One man I know from my community told me his sister was killed in the very early days of the war. Since then, three members of his extended family have died. All were civilians. In conflicts like this, the people who suffer most are usually civilians, and that has been very much the case as a consequence of the brutal aggression of Russia against its neighbour. Of course, Vladimir Putin is basically a fascist dictator trying to expand his power and grow his influence. It is clear that he has to be stood up to.

Unfortunately, with the change in regime in the US, we do not see as steadfast a line being drawn there. We have had talks and new dawns promised, including at the Alaska talks, and peace was supposed to be coming but it has not come. It has not because ultimately Putin does not want peace; Putin wants to continue the war. Unless an aggressor accepts that they have to stop, retreat and go back to the negotiating table, a war will continue. That has been the tragedy for hundreds of thousands of people in Ukraine.

I have often thought that if the hundreds of billions spent, through the war industry, on the Ukraine war alone were spent on health services or anything positive for humanity, it would make such a difference. Instead, we have genocide in Gaza and genocide in Sudan, which is going to continue. Such conflicts are feeding an industry that is making huge profits from them. That link is not pointed out often enough. We need to be firm on this and recognise that vested interests do not want war to stop, very often with tragic consequences for so many.

The Irish people have played their role. Very many families opened their hearts and homes to people from Ukraine and were enriched by that experience and by having Ukrainians in their communities. That welcome must continue. Sometimes I hear a backlash in some of our communities and all sorts of negative comments about people who come here from Ukraine or other countries. We must be very conscious that only this week a man was convicted in the courts of the murder of someone simply because he thought that person did not speak English. That tells us we have a huge problem boiling under the surface in this country. We have to address the problems of racism, Islamophobia and other prejudices. We cannot avoid that reality. While we welcome and want to accommodate people fleeing conflict and situations in which they would have their human rights denied, we recognise that, while they enrich our country, there are those with a very negative agenda. That has to be fought against.

The Irish people stand wholeheartedly with the people of Ukraine against the aggression of Russia. We want to see peace come about. We all know that peace can come about only if the aggressor accepts that peace should prevail. It is certainly the view of most people that until Vladimir Putin feels strong economic pressure, he will not relent. That pressure must come from all countries, not only those in Europe. They must stop buying Russian oil and exert

maximum sanctions to ensure Russia is brought to heel and to the negotiating table to work out a settlement that will give Ukraine back its territory and ensure a full and final peace settlement. There cannot be a settlement if Ukrainian representatives are outside the door. It is vital that they be part of it.

I am glad to be here to address this issue. Ultimately, the Irish are very clear that they want to see peace everywhere in the world. They want the many Ukrainian friends they have made to have a happy and peaceful place to go back to.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on these statements today. Some may believe the situation in Ukraine has gone away, calmed down or settled. Nothing could be further from the truth. This war is becoming more fraught by the day. Despite the invasion and aggression by Russia, the Ukrainian people continue to display immense bravery and dedication to their nation. We are now nearly four years into this war, a war that has shattered lives, displaced families and fundamentally changed the landscape in Europe.

The stakes for Europe are very high. We need to be clear that Russia will not stop in Ukraine. This is what our friends and allies in the Baltics believe to be true, and it is what we see in Russia's interference in other parts of Europe through its hybrid tactics. We have a moral duty to stand with our allies in Europe, including Ukraine. We must also push back against those who say Europe should not continue to support Ukraine.

Yesterday, Viktor Orbán pushed, not for the first time, the idea that Ukraine should not receive any more help from Europe. He went as far as to say that giving more aid to Ukraine is a bit like trying to help an alcoholic by sending them another crate of vodka. This is the Head of Government of a state within the EU. It is disgraceful and deeply offensive. Our Government, including our new Minister for foreign affairs, must do everything in her power to push back against the Hungarian Government and ensure the Ukrainian people can continue to rely on Europe as a whole. If the past weekend has shown us anything, it is that the Irish certainly know how to put pressure on the Hungarians.

The truth of the matter is that things are not getting better in or for Ukraine. The Russian military's rapid advance in the Zaporizhzhia region, where it has reportedly taken two more villages, is of great concern. Russia's attacks on the energy grid continue to ramp up as it attempts to squeeze the country during the winter. The statistics on this are very worrying. Sixty four percent of Ukraine's 25 GW generating capacity has been either destroyed or occupied since 2024. Ukraine has lost 80% of its thermal capacity since 2024. As of autumn of this year, its energy infrastructure has been operating at only about one third of its pre-invasion generation capacity. As of October 2025, Russia has destroyed 60% of Ukraine's gas production capacity. This points to an area of aid that Ireland can provide. It can provide tools to help to rebuild the grid and emergency generators. The Irish Government needs to continue to offer support in this regard. We are blessed by our geographic location, which in modern times has left us far away from bad actors such as Russia, which wishes to do us and our allies harm, but we should never take our location for granted, nor should we use our geography to wash our hands of our responsibility to stand in solidarity with our allied nations. Occupation is something this island knows well. However, the scale of violence due to Russia's illegal war is something beyond even our knowledge of occupation. Ukraine has had 400,000 members of its military killed or injured, with a further 35,000 missing as of January 2025. Over 14,000

Ukrainian civilians have also been killed. This is a nation and people scarred who are now also spread out all across the world. Over 9.5 million Ukrainians have been displaced by this war, which is 22% of the country's population.

Imagine for a second that was you and your family who had to flee from your home. No matter how welcoming the host country and family were, it is not where you would truly want to be. Now imagine that political parties in the country to which you fled are deciding to use you for political point scoring. In an Independent Ireland statement last night, Deputy O'Flynn stated, "We cannot go on handing out medical cards to anyone who happens to arrive here bearing a Ukrainian passport". That is the view of Deputy O'Flynn and Independent Ireland. They should be ashamed of themselves. We all know the pitch at which Independent Ireland's whistle is being set with its Ireland-first policy. It is the party of statements and blusters. We in the Labour Party will not throw Ukrainian people under the bus for a headline. Indeed, our housing spokesperson, Deputy Conor Sheehan, rightly called out the Government this month for the huge lack of clarity it gave the Ukrainian people living in Ireland over its commitment to change entitlements. Without a real plan, the Government risks causing mass homelessness for people who we have rightly supported to this point and still claim to support. The Government should show us it supports them, rather than simply telling us it does.

The attack yesterday on a Polish railway that was key for delivering supplies into Ukraine should be a stark reminder that Russia is a dangerous aggressor to all of Europe. Indeed, a Romanian village has also had to be evacuated yesterday due to a Russian attack near its border. I worry when I see certain politicians try to downplay what Russia is and what it is doing. It is using a hybrid war across the Continent, make no mistake about that. We simply cannot keep our heads in the sand about this. Hybrid warfare is being waged on continental Europe, of which Ireland has been a victim through the HSE attack. We also see worrying activity in our waters and the vulnerability of our undersea cables.

I welcome the increased investment in the national cybersecurity centre in this budget. As our party's spokesperson on defence, I have met experts and, to be frank, I am greatly concerned with the reactive state of our cybersecurity. The HSE cyberattack, which was instigated by a Russian group, is a warning sign for just how vulnerable we are. With speed and overdue urgency, we need to move to a more proactive space on cyber.

From reports, it seems that President Zelenskyy will be travelling to Ireland in December. What will this Government tell him when he lands? Will it be news that it plans to provide greater support to the people of Ukraine or that the amount of time Ukrainian refugees are housed in State accommodation is to be examined and potentially reduced from 90 to 30 days? I fear we, like others in Europe, are slipping into a place of complacency and acceptance that a Russian victory is inevitable. It is not just here but around Europe governments are talking about cuts to refugees from this war. Statements from Prime Minister Tusk this week fuel those fears. The Prime Minister's statement that, "Enthusiasm for supporting Ukraine has weakened in Poland and abroad. People are tired of the war and its costs, so maintaining support is harder", is not helpful to the morale of the Ukrainian people. They cannot be allowed to feel abandoned. Indeed, they cannot be abandoned. This is not a war they wanted or sought. Rather, it is a war that was thrust upon them by an illegal invasion. No one is more tired of this war and its costs than the people of Ukraine. We cannot let apathy take hold. We cannot let the Ukrainian people become a political football and we cannot stop our support for a free,

sovereign and democratic Ukraine. Like with Palestine, the history books will remember not just those who stood on the right side of history with this conflict but those who supported the Ukrainian people.

I am proud of what we have done so far as a nation. The effort of the Irish people to support the Ukrainian people who have arrived and settled here has been immense. They are our friends and neighbours and an important part of so many communities. Let us continue our support for the people of Ukraine so when President Zelenskyy arrives in Ireland, we can look him in the eye and tell him Ireland does now and will always support a free and democratic Ukraine.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** Notwithstanding other matters that may have happened today, I believe this is the most important debate to be happening in this House. It is not just about Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine but, rather, a question around the war in Europe and, indeed, a war on Europe by an increasingly aggressive Russia. I have to express my disappointment that while every other parliament in Europe has been debating and exploring this issue, this is the first time since the summer we have had the opportunity to have statements on this matter, even though I have requested it every week since we came back after the summer. It also reflects a lack of media coverage of the ongoing war in Ukraine. With some notable exceptions, we do not get the level of attention paid to what is happening. In many other countries in Europe, there is an exploration of what this means for those countries and Europe more widely. I criticise *The Irish Times* in particular, which decided to publish an opinion piece this week in which other European countries were criticised for deciding to invest in defence but yet not once in that opinion piece was the reason mentioned, that is, their fear of the threat coming from Russia.

I welcome the fact that President Zelenskyy is likely to come to Ireland in December. I called previously for him to be invited to address the joint Houses in person, as he previously did online. It would be welcome both to show our solidarity in these Houses and also to recognise the enormous contribution of those Ukrainians who came here, both before and after the war, and how they are contributing to all of our communities.

Next year, Ireland will hold the Presidency of the European Council of the European Union. It is at a critical period. We have always had a very proud record in support of enlargement. We need to use that period of our Presidency to do what we can to further Ukraine's future membership of the European Union. In the same way in 1990, when Charles Haughey was Taoiseach, we held the Presidency and we supported a unified Germany becoming a member of the EU. In 2004, when Bertie Ahern was Taoiseach during that EU Presidency, we supported the largest ever accession when ten countries, including eight from central and eastern Europe, joined the EU. We should do whatever we can to support the accession of Ukraine and, indeed, other countries at that time.

I commend those members of the European Parliament - I note Barry Andrews, for instance, is currently in Ukraine - who have continued to ensure at a European level that all European countries, including Ireland, continue to show solidarity with Ukraine. Indeed, questions should be asked of some of our MEPs who have failed to show that solidarity over the last number of years.

We know about the horrors of the impact of the war in Ukraine. Yet, as I said, they are not sufficiently debated in this House. It is horrific that there are now an estimated 20,000

Ukrainian children who have been forcibly transferred to areas under Russian control by the Russian defence forces. Think about that number - 20,000 children - and the impact that has on their families and, more importantly, the long-term trauma of those children. We know that Putin has no regard for the rights of those children. Yet, why is it that we are not doing enough to ensure that they are reunited with their families?

I wish to touch on a number of questions that we as a country need to address in our own context with regard to security and defence. I will start by referencing the Russian shadow fleet. RTÉ has previously reported that, based on intelligence, 245 shadow fleet vessels have passed through Irish waters more than 450 times in the first seven months of this year. A total of 72 of those vessels were named by intelligence as already being on sanctions lists and many of those were part of the Russian shadow fleet. I find it bizarre that we are not calling this out in this House the whole time. We can be absolutely certain that if an American vessel was in Irish waters without permission, people in this House would rightly be criticising it and screaming and shouting. If an Israeli vessel was unlawfully in Irish waters, we would be having debates nearly every week about the issue. The Russian shadow fleet, though, is passing through without debate in this House and, quite frankly, without sufficient action being taken. I welcome the fact that Canada, which is at the other side of the exclusive economic zone and shares responsibility for much of the Atlantic, is now stepping up pressure against the Russian shadow fleet. In terms of our responsibility, particularly if we really are a neutral country, then we do need to take action, not only because this shadow fleet is engaged in sanction-busting but because many of these vessels are, for want of a better description, rust buckets. If any of them are in any way damaged or are transferring oil in the Atlantic or other parts of the world, there is a huge environmental risk and this will impact Irish waters. Yet, we have never had a debate about the Russian shadow fleet operating within our waters.

When we look at cyber infrastructure, again, people here know only too well about the HSE attack, which Deputy Duncan Smith referred to. Ultimately, it will have cost the State in excess of €500 million, but more importantly, lives were lost as a result of it. We are seeing increasing numbers of cyberattacks by Russia on Ireland and on other European states. This is because Russia does not respect Ireland's neutrality when it comes to cyberspace. It is determined to do anything to undermine states that believe in democracy, human rights and the rule of law. We can see this too if we look at the attempts by Russia to influence Romania and Moldova in their elections. I have no doubt that we will see Russian bots trying to influence elections here in Ireland in the future and we need to be prepared for that.

I make no apologies for saying we need to stand in solidarity with our European partners and neighbours, in the same way they showed great solidarity with us when we faced the threats of Brexit. If we look at what has happened to our fellow European states, the Estonians, the Lithuanians and the Latvians can tell us plenty in terms of the cyberattacks over the last number of years, but it is not just about what has happened in recent years. Let us look at even just the last few months. In September alone, Members will be aware that 19 unarmed Russian drones landed in Poland. That was no accident. In Denmark, when European leaders, including the Taoiseach, were gathering, drone attacks led to the closure of the airports around Copenhagen. At the same time, three Russian MiG-31 jets violated Estonian airspace. We know, therefore, that Russia is showing increased aggression, not just to Ukraine but to other European countries. Indeed, Boris Pistorius, the German defence minister, who is an SPD politician, a

social democrat, has warned that he is now expecting increasing Russian escalation and has said that this past summer may have been the last summer Europe is at peace.

We should not, therefore, underestimate the threat being posed to Europe. This is no longer a conflict purely about Ukraine. This is about a war on Europe by an increasingly hostile Russian regime. I am someone who deeply believes in multilateralism and I am strongly committed to the UN Charter. Yet, there are those who believe that in this country we should not be preparing to deal with the potential threat of increased Russian aggression, and who believe that Russia will have no interest, somehow, in Ireland. I say we should be listening to our friends in the Baltics and in central and eastern Europe because they know from their experience exactly what is going on. Anybody in this House who expects Vladimir Putin to respect the UN Charter is clearly deluded. There is absolutely no hope of Putin respecting it.

It is really important that we continue to focus on providing whatever support we can - non-military support - to Ukraine. We need to continue to call out Russia at every international forum, whether it is for the cyberattacks, its brutal war against Ukraine, the abduction of children or the undermining of the UN Charter. This issue is incredibly important. I cannot figure out why, when we have Russian vessels operating in our waters, we are not debating this issue every week. Why are we not debating this issue when the key aspects of digital and energy infrastructure are under threat from Russian vessels and the shadow fleet operating in Irish waters? People say the Russians are not going to touch us. Well, they already are. Why do we think the Russian fleet and the shadow fleet are operating in Irish waters? Anybody in this House who has any doubts should talk to states like Finland and Sweden, states that share our perspective on the world, and they will tell them exactly about the threats we face. I believe that in this House and in many of the public debates, we have been naive and gullible about the threat being faced in Europe by Russia. We really need to finally face up to it.

I welcome the fact we are having a debate today. This has to be the top priority for our new Minister for foreign affairs. I wish her well in that role. We should have no doubt that in our Presidency of the EU Council next year, this will be an even bigger issue. The threat will be even more significant. When it comes to cybersecurity and protecting our waters, we are going to have to face up to it. We need to continue to show our support for Ukraine, but equally, we need to make sure this country and the rest of Europe are prepared for what is happening. I hope the Minister of State will bring this topic to her colleagues in the Government. I have been disappointed so far in that I do not believe this matter has received sufficient attention either in this House or by the Government, but by God, we are going to need to address it.

In the meantime, to the many people from Ukraine who have found their home here and found refuge, I continue to say "*slava Ukraini*". We will continue to support those people. You are welcome here. Thank you for your contribution. For however long it takes in your battle to uphold the principles of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, we will stand by you.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** On behalf of Deputy Heneghan, I welcome Gavin, Myles, Joan and David Flood to the Public Gallery. They are all very welcome. I hope they enjoy the debate and their time here in the Leinster House. I call on Deputy Rory Hearne.

**Deputy Rory Hearn:** Go raibh míle maith agat. I start by expressing the Social Democrats' warm welcome for President Zelenskyy's upcoming visit and our absolute, unreserved condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is an imperial war that has caused massive loss of life. We talk about the war in Ukraine and Russia's attack and sometimes I think there has not been enough focus on the number of people killed in that war, and particularly military - the soldiers on either side. We do not know the exact figures, but from what we do know they are absolutely shocking. There are potentially 250,000 Russian soldiers dead with up to 1 million casualties, including wounded. In Ukraine, the figures are between 60,000 and 100,000 soldiers killed. That is at least 350,000 people, many of them soldiers, killed in that war. These are human beings whose lives have been wiped out by that war. Up to 1.5 million people are casualties of the Russian invasion, an illegal invasion, with many war crimes as part of that.

When we talk about the war in Ukraine and European defence, we need to keep those numbers in mind. The question that comes to my mind is how many more tens or hundreds of thousands of people are going to be killed in the Russian invasion and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war? When we talk about building European defence and this move to war and war preparedness in Europe, we really need to question how many Europeans are going to get killed in the ongoing war and how many people are going to lose their lives.

I reiterate our firm support for Ukraine's sovereignty and its territorial integrity. We call for and want to see further strengthening of economic sanctions on Russia. We believe the European Union and Ireland could be doing more to implement those sanctions. The use of military force is not the only way to challenge aggressors like Russia. The economic sanctions are also very important and the European Union and Ireland should be pushing harder on this by increasing the sanctions that are there.

In this debate, I want to talk about our concerns around the undermining of Ireland's neutrality, the push to war that is happening at a European level, and that greater European involvement in war and defence being termed as increasing the European Union's security and defence. I am deeply concerned about the direction the European Union is going in. Of course we have to stop the Ukraine-Russia war and that Russian invasion but war is not the only way to do it. We have to find peaceful ways to resolve this war.

I want to speak in short about and quote Ms Kaja Kallas, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission. Her comments deeply worried me when I saw them. This is from last week. Her role is to lead a more strategic and assertive foreign and security policy at EU level. She is responsible for strengthening Europe's security and defence. She points out that she is ensuring Europe stands with Ukraine and co-ordinating the work to build a European defence union. She said: "Wars are lost by whoever runs out of money or soldiers first." I want to repeat that statement. She said: "Wars are lost by whoever runs out of money or soldiers first." Wars are not just lost or ended by whoever runs out of money or soldiers. They are ended by interventions by states through the United Nations, different mechanisms, diplomatic measures and peace negotiations. I am deeply disturbed by that statement.

What is the future for ending the Ukraine war? Is it constantly pumping in more money and soldiers with more deaths? How many deaths are we going to reach? Will it be 500,000 or 1 million people who will die in that war? Ireland needs to play a role of peacemaker and call

out that the only way to end wars is not just by pumping money into weapons or killing more and more people, where whoever loses decides they have lost the most amount, but by diplomacy, intervention and a human rights framework that we have signed up to as a country and are part of. I again urge our Government to pursue paths of peace, diplomacy, pressure and economic sanctions rather than just this drive to a deeper pumping of billions into war and this war machine that is being built up.

It is deeply disappointing that the European Union is suspending its fiscal rules and basically saying to countries that they should spend whatever they need to pump up defence spending. Yet when we see a housing crisis across the European Union and millions who are without a proper home, there is no such suspension of the fiscal rules to enable social spending for that. When we look at issues around the cost of living and basic services for disability around the European Union and when we look at poverty, there is no such relaxing of fiscal rules. I question why we are suspending fiscal rules for defence and pumping billions in and yet we are not doing that for people's basic standards of living. When we talk about the safety and security of our people, their welfare is the basic foundation block of building safety and security. I am deeply concerned that we are marching as part of a European drumbeat to a war. Ms Kallas said:

Next week ... [she] will present ... with the [European] Commission, a plan to improve military mobility [in Europe] ... this will include proposals to make our roads, bridges, tunnels, train lines, airports and other infrastructure projects able to cope with large scale military movements ...

We are preparing our European infrastructure for large scale military movements but we do not prepare for or invest in our European infrastructure to ensure our people have housing, healthcare, decent quality of services or even transport. It has to be worrying to see our European Commission talk about preparing our European infrastructure for large-scale military movements. Where are the large-scale military movements going to? What war are we going to be part of? What are we talking about here and where is Europe bringing us? It is absolutely a legitimate position to take that we are completely supportive of the European project, the European Union, cohesion, commonality and working together in a common infrastructure and institutions but also to hold a critical position on militarisation and, as I will argue when we look at the evidence, preparation for war in Europe and for an increased involvement of the European Union in that. We know throughout history that when the drums are banged for war and the talk is about war, a war inevitably happens. If we want to talk about peace and make peace happen, we need to invest in that as well.

In my remaining time, I want to talk about neutrality, the importance of Irish neutrality and of us being a country that questions the drive to war and - to quote Catherine Connolly, who was elected President - the "military-industrial complex" at a European level. A lot of people threw that phrase around as if it was some kind of joke or something that was not serious. This is very serious. I have set it out there. Billions are going into military but what is going into social services? The reason President Catherine Connolly made those points was that we have seen in the US an imperial war machine being built up over time. A point Noam Chomsky has made over and over is that if you create a military industrial complex where the economy is built around investment weapons, you have to use those weapons. They have to be used somewhere. The investment in weapons creates a necessity for the creation of a war and for

those weapons to be used because otherwise, why are you investing in them? Why are you creating them? Why are you putting billions in? We need to question this, question where we are going and what war is Europe and Ireland in particular going to be part of on an active basis. We need to protect our neutrality and, in particular, the triple lock.

To finish, I want to talk about the issue of our welcome for the people of Ukraine and those fleeing the ongoing war. It was deeply disappointing to see the cut in support for the hosts of Ukrainian refugees - the accommodation recognition payment, ARP, funding. We need to correct the idea that Ukrainians are coming to Ireland to scam the system. When we look at what happened, we see that Ukrainians are coming to seek refuge from a war where up to 100,000 of their fellow citizens have been killed. Looking at those refugees coming here from Ukraine, the majority are women and children. Almost 30% of Ukrainian refugees are children. They are in schools across the country and have become part of our communities. People have welcomed them and massive work has been done in schools and communities to welcome the people of Ukraine and their children and to integrate their children. It does require resources and the Government has to a certain extent put those in, but it is not sufficient. We do see positive stories across the country of people welcoming refugees and doing that positive community and integration work. It is another side to the anti-immigrant sentiment we are also seeing. There is a quiet majority in Ireland who are absolutely supportive of us being a welcoming country and giving care and support. Indeed, they are a very active group.

However, our Government cut that payment and, unfortunately, it will worsen the housing crisis. Some have claimed that the payment is adding to the housing crisis. In fact, cutting it will add to the housing crisis. Where will the 35,000 Ukrainians who were hosted go if the funding to host is cut?

Irish Red Cross research on hosts has shown that over half of hosts said the recognition payment was a key factor in them being able to continue their host placement. The research also showed the reason the majority of hosts were motivated to do so was due to solidarity with displaced Ukrainians. Significantly, 91% of the hosts had a positive experience, 83% of them said they had played a role in helping their guests to integrate, and 70% of the hosts said their guests had successfully integrated into the community. However, half of the hosts said they were struggling with financial costs and many of them also said the hosting they were doing was in their home or was not in a property that would be rented out, so hosting is not taking from the rental market. The Irish Red Cross has called on the Government not to cut the payment but to explore the expansion of the ARP to provide accommodation for other displaced groups because it provides accommodation that would not necessarily be available otherwise because it is people taking others into their homes on the basis of solidarity. I also think that the cut in the accommodation period will lead to Ukrainian people being made homeless, as a result of the Government's shift to be seen as hard on immigration. There has been a lot of discussion on this and we have called out the Government, including Simon Harris, Micheál Martin and others, for taking this anti-immigrant shift. It is not just playing into the far right; it is also playing into and feeding a rising racism by suggesting that, somehow, immigrants are to blame for the housing situation and other issues when they are absolutely not and it is the Government deflecting from its responsibility.

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak about the very worrying spectre and instance of there being war in Europe for the first time in decades. It is

important to take a moment to check and remind ourselves of the sheer significance and impact of that statement, that there is war on the Continent of Europe, a plane flight away from where we are at the moment. It becomes very real when you go to Brussels or speak to colleagues from countries that are in the eastern part of the European Union or border Russia and have in their lines of sight drones being flown into their airspace. There is a very real sense among our friends and partners in the European Union that there is a very live threat on the Continent of Europe. In Ireland, we cannot afford to put our heads in the sand and ignore the fact that threat exists.

We have to be careful that we create a space to discuss the existence of this threat and that we do not instantly march or rush towards the fact that this is increasing militarisation or is instantly a threat to our neutrality. It is a recognition of the same threats and fears the people in Estonia, Sweden, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania feel about the potential aggression of the Russian Federation, in the same way we spoke to our European partners about standing in solidarity with us during the Brexit negotiations or the economic crisis. It is not unreasonable or ungenerous of them to request of us in this country or of our Government to stand in solidarity and listen to the fears of our partners about the threat they very much feel on their borders.

While the war in Ukraine and the aggression by Russia are entirely illegal and undermine international law, in many ways they show that we need to stand for the sovereignty of the nation state, and not only for the sovereignty of the nation state but for the integrity of its borders and territory as well. If we fail to do that, then we very much fail to uphold the principle underpinning the European Union and the modern concept of the nation state, namely, that it has inviolable borders and that that is a principle worth recognition and acknowledgement in and of itself.

That is why it is important, not only in recognising the immediate threat Russia poses to countries in the Baltics, for example, or in Scandinavia, that the European Union is also seen to take a stand on the need for the championing of democracy, the need for the integrity of borders, the need for the integrity of the nation state and ultimately, the respect of self-determination for people in respect of where they want to go and how they want to govern themselves, which has been violated by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

We have led a very humanitarian response in this country. Over 100,000 people have come to our country seeking temporary protection as a result of the war. That is something I have seen in my own constituency. I pay tribute to all communities and households who have welcomed Ukrainian people into their families, communities and schools. Fundamentally, our schools very quickly pivoted, reacted and embraced the Ukrainian children who came into their schools and made them part of our society and community and integrated them fully. Great credit is due to all of the schools around the country that undertook this act. I give particular credit to the teachers and parents involved in each instance.

It does now force us in Ireland to hold a mirror to ourselves in terms of how we would respond to any form of aggression that might be part of this. This is not just in terms of conventional military warfare. We saw the devastating impact of the cyberattack on the HSE a number of months ago and how that crippled its IT system. It is important that we recognise the very real threats that exist in regard to cyber warfare and the incursion of drones into our airspace. I am very proud that Baldonnel aerodrome is in my constituency and I encourage the new Minister

for Defence to continue the rapid programme of investment in giving us radar capability to understand what is in our skies and to be able to respond accordingly. Again, that is not increasing militarisation; it is prudent safeguarding of the security of the country. It is important that we create a discussion where we look at other neutral countries that are not members of military alliances and the investment they make in their defence forces to ensure they can secure their neutrality and protect their borders in a balanced and reasonable way.

To go back to my fundamental point, we cannot ignore the fact the war on European soil has brought into focus the very real threat that countries that are our European partners feel around the possibility of Russian aggression. We need to create a responsible space in this country to discuss this. It is a grey area and anyone on any side of this debate needs to accept there will be ambiguity in some of the terminology and some of the definitions we use. However, we need to open the conversation about how we safeguard our neutrality, how we stand in solidarity with our European allies and how we make sure our Defence Forces, of which we are all very proud and which have a proud legacy of peacekeeping, are equipped properly and that we have the equipment to keep Ireland safe, be it on land, air, sea or from cyber attacks. We must recognise that Ireland now is a very strategic economic, communications and digital location for not only companies but also our Government and our European partners. We must show that we are able to protect what we have, what we hold dear, and the European Union must show that it stands in solidarity with those countries that do feel that fear.

7 o'clock

That, ultimately, is a success of the European Union project. It shows the ability of smaller member states to be protected by others but also to allow them to punch above their weight in their influence in global affairs. It is important that we acknowledge this.

Finally, I want to talk about peace in Ukraine. All of us across the European Union and across the world want peace in Ukraine, but we want a just peace. We do not want a peace that is forced by the might of larger countries because they have demonstrated military aggression. There is a role for the EU in safeguarding that peace and honouring that peace. It needs to be a fair peace, it needs a balanced approach to that peace and it needs to respect the fundamental principles at the heart of European liberal democracies, which are the integrity of the nation state, the ability of a state to protect its borders and, fundamentally, the right to self-determination for a country.

If I have any last call to action it is: that we create a space in this country where we can have the discussion about security and defence policy without instantly running to the ramparts and saying, "Neutrality is under threat"; that we actually take account of the fact that the same people stood by us when we asked them for help 20 or 30 years ago or even ten years ago and that we show that same level of solidarity and we do not dismiss their concerns; that we make sure that the public debate in this country reflects the very real fear that is being felt in countries around the world; that we act as a Government and as a Dáil to ensure that our Defence Forces are well equipped to protect our country; and, ultimately, that we are seen as European partners who stand in solidarity, whatever form that may be, while also respecting our traditional military neutrality in this country.

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** I wish to speak to the gravity of what is happening on our Continent with the war in Ukraine. It continues to inflict devastating human and societal

geopolitical damage and change. According to one of the latest briefings, the scale of the suffering is humongous. The bombardment of cities, with its civilian casualties and with its infrastructure under relentless attack, is severe and it must not be ignored. It is not at the top of the headlines in the news anymore but the war is happening still for those citizens of Ukraine. It is over three years since the full-scale and unprovoked invasion by Russia of Ukraine. The conflict stretches back years to the illegal annexation of Crimea. Let us make no mistake: this is not a war of defence by Russia, it is aggression. The enemy of peace is taking aim at civilians and the civilian infrastructure on which all modern life depends, including educational and health institutions. This is what we are witnessing in Ukraine. It is done unto them by Russia.

When international borders can be changed by force and when international law becomes optional, the very underpinnings of our global orders are at risk. At the recent fifth Summit of the International Crime Platform, the Taoiseach stated: "We cannot allow force to be the means by which international borders are defined." As Europeans, we must continue to stand with Ukraine, not just with words but also with deeds. The people of Ukraine deserve the full support of the international community. Their struggle is our struggle. It is a struggle for respect, for sovereignty and for the rule of law. Ukraine is a sovereign and independent nation and it has to be afforded the fundamental right to peace, security and full respect for its internationally recognised borders. Justice is not just a luxury: it is a foundation of any lasting peace. We have to remember that. It is a matter of principle that we build a comprehensive, just and lasting peace for Ukraine. We have to sustain our humanitarian, financial and diplomatic support. There is no backing away from that. We have to push our EU and global partners for more sanctions and for more mechanisms to hold Russia to account. We have to insist that peace negotiations must respect Ukraine sovereignty and its territorial integrity. A ceasefire based on occupation, fear or forced surrender is not peace at all.

As previous colleagues said, this is more than just a war on Ukraine, or Ukraine versus Russia: this is a war on Europe. It is a war on our moral compass and what we are used to on this Continent. We have to stand tall against it. Some might argue that as a neutral state, Ireland is compromised by taking such a firm stance on Ukraine but we absolutely are not, in the same way we are not compromised by taking a strong stance on Gaza and the horrific genocide being visited on the people of Gaza. Neutrality is not meant for moral indifference. It is not about standing silent when our larger neighbour tries to erase the smaller one. Our neutrality is a military neutrality, not an ethical or political neutrality, and certainly not a licence for inaction. If anything, I believe that our neutral status places a heavier responsibility upon us. We have to rely on international law, our sovereignty and our multilateral institutions to guarantee our own security and the security of Europe. When those very principles are being shredded by Russia's aggression, Ireland cannot simply watch from the sidelines. We have to make sure that we are not compromised and that we are compelled to act. If we allow a world where borders can be redrawn by force and where the UN Charter is treated as a footnote, small countries like us will be the first to lose. Supporting Ukraine is not a departure from neutrality; it is a defence of the international order that protects our neutral states in the first place. We must protect ourselves, as Deputy Moynihan said, in protecting our neutrality and in protecting our nation. We are under threat by being a very strong economic hub in Europe. We have to wake up to the reality that we have to make sure we can defend ourselves as a neutral state. I will support the new Minister for Defence when she is investing in our Defence Forces and investing in our radar and our capabilities because we must ensure that we protect ourselves.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** As many other speakers have said, Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a bloody, unjustified and criminal endeavour, which has led to absolute carnage. That carnage continues. The scale of human devastation is unknown because both sides do not want to admit to how many people have been killed. Some estimates suggest that more than 1 million people have either lost their lives or have been injured and maimed. Ukraine admits to about 50,000 of its military personnel being killed, although some suggest that the numbers killed could be double that, and hundreds of thousands more have been injured and maimed. In Russia, some estimates suggest there might be 250,000 military personnel dead and hundreds of thousands more maimed and injured. One report I read recently suggested that Russian ministries had distributed more than 200,000 prosthetic limbs because so many soldiers are losing their arms and legs. It is disgusting.

Undoubtedly Putin is the instigator of this unjustified and imperialist endeavour. The Taoiseach is absolutely correct to call it imperialism. The people of Ukraine have been absolutely justified in resisting this brutal invasion of their country. The problem I have, and it is why I believe our neutrality is in danger, is that the Government and European Union leaders go from that to say that their main concern in all of this is to defend the international rules-based order and our neutrality and imply that they have a consistent set of principles when it comes to opposing imperialism, brutal invasions and wars. That self-evidently is not true. We have had 19 rounds of sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union but not a single round of sanctions by the European Union against Israel for the crimes it has committed against the Palestinian people, even when those crimes have reached the level of Israel being in the dock for genocide, and to my mind being undoubtedly guilty of genocide. There has not been a single round of sanctions. You would believe in here, with the speeches from the Ministers, that when they rightly describe Putin as a brutal imperialist thug that he is the only one in the world. There is barely a mention of the genocidal slaughter being inflicted on the Palestinians. That slaughter could not have happened were it not for another imperialist power, or several of them. The United States has armed Israel to commit the genocide against the Palestinians and is every bit as much an imperialist power as Putin and his regime or, indeed, the more minor players in the European Union, such as Germany, Britain, France and Italy, which have also provided the military means to Israel to continue the slaughter and refuse to impose any sanctions.

If the United States and the European Union actually do not show any serious regard for international law, or for any sort of consistency when it comes to principles, is it a surprise that the signal sent out is that all of it is nonsense and the truth is you take what you can get through military means? I would go further and say that many in the European Union have long wanted to see a European army and to ratchet up military expenditure. By the way, in the European Union this expenditure had dramatically increased before Russia's invasion of Ukraine as part of the ongoing process of militarisation in the European Union and of NATO expansion. Russia spends a shocking 19% of GDP on arms. This is on military expenditure. It is starving and immiserating its own people. It spends \$149 billion. Do you know how much NATO spends? It spends \$1.5 trillion, which is ten times what Russia spends on arms.

Thousands of billions of euro that should be going into health, housing, education and addressing the cost of living are used to make missiles, weapons, bullets and ammunition, which are then sold on if they are not used in this war and given to Israel, Saudi Arabia, dictatorships and brutal regimes all over the world, which are also guilty of inflicting horror on

their populations. If we are serious about trying to stop the slaughter in Ukraine or anywhere else, we have to have consistent principles and we should not be aligning ourselves with any of these powers in the world that are guilty of this imperialist competition and militarism, which will drive this world into a very dangerous and dark place and which would make even Gaza and Ukraine not look like a tea party because it is so horrific. It could bring us to an even worse place.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** It is now three years and nine months since Russia undertook its illegal invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory. The impact of this war continues to be felt most immediately in Ukraine, where it is estimated around 15,000 civilians and up to 80,000 members of Ukrainian military are dead and the number of wounded in that country runs to hundreds of thousands. Notwithstanding their brutal dictatorial leaders, the Russian people have also suffered as a result of this war, with a death toll in that country estimated as running to hundreds of thousands. When we think of these huge numbers, we have to recognise that each one represents a despair and heartbreak brought to a family, always reminding us of the brutal cost of conflict. The impact of these wars has been huge in terms of disruption of trade and in terms of the undermining of norms of international law. The war has also been key driver in one of the most long-lasting cost-of-living crises that many of us have seen in our lifetime.

Throughout this war Ireland has been steadfast in its support of Ukraine, and the forthcoming visit of President Zelenskyy here will be an opportunity for us as a country and for the Government to reiterate our position on this. As a country, we have provided more than €380 million in financial aid to Ukraine, in the context of humanitarian assistance and in the context of non-lethal military equipment and materials. However, I would argue that probably our most meaningful support provided to Ukraine is in the context of the safety and shelter that Ireland has given to tens of thousands of Ukrainians, which has been offered since the very first days of the illegal Russian invasion. Across three years and nine months more than 114,000 Ukrainians have claimed temporary protection here in Ireland. While estimates vary, it is believed that between 70,000 and 80,000 Ukrainian men, women and children continue to see Ireland as their home today.

It is valuable to reflect on the sheer scale of the humanitarian response that we undertook as a country and how communities working with the Government, civil society and NGOs enabled tens of thousands of people to find homes, schools and basic provisions, and to find a sense of community and solidarity in what was undoubtedly one of the darkest times in many of their lives. As the Minister overseeing the initial accommodation response I met Ukrainians. In the very first weeks of the war I met some who had literally bundled up their families into a car as the war began and drove across Europe to Ireland and to Dublin. I remember in three or four situations people literally arrived at the doorstep of the Department of children on Baggot Street. They spoke to me and officials there and talked about what it was like to see bombs falling on their homes and to see an invading occupying force march down their street with tanks and jeeps. The conversations that I had with these very early arrivals will always stay with me. They will always be for me a strong reminder of why it is so important that countries around the world have provisions in place to make arrangements for those fleeing war and those fleeing conflict.

Our country's response to the needs of Ukrainians was undertaken in an emergency situation. It was not always smooth and it was not always perfect but it did show the generosity of spirit and sense of solidarity that is the basis of so many communities around our country. For example, while there were teething problems with the pledged accommodation scheme undertaken by the Red Cross, it has subsequently been hugely successful. The International Red Cross now cites our pledged accommodation scheme as a model of how such a scheme can work elsewhere. What was really important in supporting it was the accommodation recognition payment. This allows for the independence of Ukrainian families. It allows for better integration with Irish families and communities. It was also far more cost-effective for the State versus hotel or guest house accommodation.

Right now about 24,000 Ukrainians continue to be supported through the recognition payment. This payment was reduced earlier this year. I would be concerned about proposals to either reduce it further or, as has been suggested by some in the House, to remove it entirely. Research undertaken by Helping Irish Hosts and analysis undertaken by the Department of housing indicate the vast majority of accommodation in respect of which the payment is made was never rental property previously. The recognition payment has been hugely successful in opening up accommodation that was previously unused. Of course a payment of this scale should always be examined and kept under review, and if there are issues arising they can be addressed. We should be looking to see how something such as this, which is an incredibly successful model, can benefit other groups who need short-term accommodation. This should be the focus of the Government and not scrapping a scheme that is achieving so much.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to these statements on Ukraine as we approach the fourth winter since Russia launched its full-scale illegal invasion. I again acknowledge the Ukrainian ambassador, H. E. Larysa Gerasko, and community representatives, who are very engaged with all of us in the House. I put on record our solidarity with them, rooted in the principles of the UN Charter and in our own history as a small State whose independence was hard won. In this Chamber in February, I said there can be no agreement on Ukraine without Ukraine. This principle is even more important today. Any peace must be just and sustainable, and must uphold Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity within internationally recognised borders.

In August 2022, I travelled to Kyiv as part of a parliamentary delegation from across Europe. I saw ruined homes, schools, crèches, community centres and businesses that had been deliberately targeted by Russian forces. Since then, missiles and drones have continued to strike apartment blocks, energy networks and water systems, designed to break civilian morale and to weaponise winter. Against that brutality, what has struck me most in my dealings with Ukrainians, be it in Kyiv, my own constituency of Dún Laoghaire or here in Leinster House, is their resilience and their gratitude to Ireland. Earlier this year at a rally for Ukraine in Dublin, the chant of “Thank you, Ireland. Thank you, Ireland” rang out again and again. That is a message to every household that has opened its doors, to every school that has taken in Ukrainian children and to every community that has made space for new neighbours.

I also acknowledge the work of colleagues beyond this House. Dublin MEP Barry Andrews was in Ukraine this week, seeing the situation on the ground and reinforcing Ireland's position at a European level. His visit underlines that this is a cross-party, all-institution effort to keep Ukraine high on the agenda when other crises risk crowding it out. Russia's war is not just an

attack on Ukraine. It is a direct challenge to European security and to the rules-based international order. We have seen drones and missiles crossing into the airspace of EU and NATO states and hybrid attacks on critical infrastructure here and elsewhere. If we allow this to succeed, we send a message that borders can be changed by brute force and that smaller states are fair game. That is why Ireland's role, though militarily non-aligned, is not as a bystander. We are firmly on the side of international law.

We are contributing to Ukraine's defence in a way that is consistent with our traditional policy of military neutrality - through non-lethal military assistance, humanitarian and development funding and training initiatives that help Ukraine to clear mines, protect civilians and keep basic services running. We have supported practical measures, such as bomb shelters for schools, so that education can continue under the threat of air raids. This is done in partnership with Lithuania. As a country that has benefited enormously from EU membership, we strongly support Ukraine's path to the European Union and we want to see accession negotiations unblocked and accelerated.

EU membership must form part of a broader set of security guarantees for Ukraine, alongside military, economic and political support. Russia cannot be allowed a veto over Ukraine's European future. A critical question for Europe now is how we finance Ukraine's long-term reconstruction and security needs. The European Union is examining how the profits and cash balances from immobilised Russian sovereign assets can be used to back a substantial reparation loan for Ukraine, alongside grants and other instruments. This principle is simple: Russia should pay for the destruction it has caused. Ireland has already committed significant humanitarian, development and non-lethal military support and our institutions have frozen large sums linked to the Russian regime under the EU's sanctions regime.

Finally, I welcome the intention of President Zelenskyy to visit the Oireachtas in December. That visit will be an important moment to reaffirm Ireland's support, to hear directly from Ukraine's leadership about their needs and to demonstrate that the Oireachtas and the Irish people continue to stand with the people of Ukraine in their time of crisis. Our message should be clear and united that there can be no lasting peace built on fear, occupation or eroded rights. Peace will come when Russia ends its aggression and when Ukraine can live in security as a free European democracy, within the family of nations and, we hope, within the European Union.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on this today. It is almost four years since the invasion occurred. It is important that we acknowledge in the House the role Ireland has played over the four years. In particular, I commend the Irish citizens and communities who have worked so hard on integrating people from Ukraine and supporting them, right across my constituency and right across Ireland.

What is happening is utterly barbaric and the loss of life is really difficult to comprehend. I spoke to a Ukrainian family the other day and they outlined the horrific situation that is still happening on a weekly basis. Aontú will continue to condemn the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. As we enter its fourth year, it is really important that we in Ireland and the international community uses every possible lever. We have a very strong and proud tradition of peace and neutrality. I urge the Government to use this competence that we have to initiate dialogue. Every action and communication from the international community should be to de-

escalate this situation. I urge the Government to play an active role in that. The priority must be to prevent further loss of innocent life and destruction of infrastructure by actively championing negotiations consistent with Ukrainian sovereignty but the UN Charter as well.

Our stance on Ukraine is intrinsically linked to our policy of neutrality and our commitment to peace. This is currently being challenged by the Government as it proposes to dismantle the triple lock. I urge the Government to remember where the triple lock came from. This was a key commitment in an EU referenda.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** It is from the 1950s.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** That is where it came from.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** It came in during the 1950s.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I urge the Government to remember where this triple lock came from.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke):** It is not a back and forth.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** It came from legislation from 1954.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke):** The Minister will have an opportunity to wrap up at the end.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** All right.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I will not interrupt the Minister of State and I would appreciate the opportunity to finish. The triple lock is under threat from this Government. That is the case. It is a vital safeguard to protect neutrality. Removing the triple lock would remove the third arm of the lock and would allow the Government, which is effectively the Cabinet, to act. As Deputy John McGuinness said here not so long ago, the Government is increasingly becoming a small number of individuals. It is not simply the Cabinet but the leaders of respective parties. As Deputy McGuinness said, we must be cautious and careful in relation to this. I urge the Government to reconsider. If it is so intent on removing the triple lock, let us put it to the Irish people. Let the Irish people decide.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I can hear you.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** Let the Irish people decide what their view is on the triple lock and neutrality in this country.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** Ireland has a long record of goodwill. When families fled the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we opened our doors and we opened our hearts. That was the right thing to do. However, goodwill must behold its shape. It must be fair and it must be sustainable. Across Europe, governments are adjusting their supports as the conflict continues. Germany

has applied the same means test to those of its own citizens. The Czech Republic limits free accommodation to 90 days and has set modest monthly allowances. Poland has withdrawn its cash payments to private hosts. Slovakia has reduced its accommodation support by half.

Ireland, one of the few states that has granted full welfare equivalent supports from the start, still gives a full medical card to every Ukrainian passport holder upon arrival, without a means test and without proof of prior residence in Ukraine. In a reply to a recent parliamentary question from me, the HSE confirmed that since 2022, more than €92 million has been spent on medical cards alone, consisting of €14.15 million in 2022, €24.2 million in 2023, €28.96 million in 2024 and €25.03 million in the first nine months of 2025.

At the same time, more than 16,600 Irish citizens, including 5,200 children, live in emergency accommodation or on the streets in many of our cities and towns. Many of our older citizens lose their medical cards because of small pension increases that push them over the threshold and face review after review, year after year. While the State has been able to fund large-scale supports for our new arrivals, our survivors of institutional abuse had to go on hunger strike for over 50 days outside the gates of this very Parliament to secure a modest pension uplift and a basic medical card for roughly 4,000 people. In recent years, the State has resourced many groups overnight but the survivors of these institutional abuses had to put their health on the line to be heard. That contrast gives rise to a serious question about the priorities of the Irish Government. This is not directed at Ukrainian families, as the Labour Party suggested in this House earlier; it is directed at a Government that treats groups of people differently based solely on political convenience rather than the needs of its own people. Fairness demands one standard. I ask the Government to ensure that we have one standard for everybody in this country.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I want to address Ireland's position under the EU migration and asylum pact. I have a clear question: can Ireland apply for an exemption? Under the pact, every EU member state must contribute to a solidarity mechanism to assist countries under migratory pressure. This means relocating asylum seekers, paying €20,000 per person not relocated, or providing operational support. There is no blanket opt-out but countries facing significant immigration challenges can apply for partial or full deductions. Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia and Poland are expected to seek such exemptions for 2026. Ireland is not currently on that list although the European Commissioners has flagged us as at risk of migratory pressure.

Let us look at the facts. According to the Central Statistics Office, immigration hit historic highs in the year to April 2024 with 149,200 immigrants, which was the highest number in 17 years. In the year to April 2025, there were 125,300 immigrants, marking the fourth consecutive year above 100,000. In 2024, there was a record 18,560 asylum applications, ranking Ireland third in the EU *per capita*. The main countries of origin were Nigeria, Jordan, Pakistan, Somalia and Afghanistan. Since March 2022, more than 113,900 Ukrainians have received PPS numbers under temporary protection. About 80,000 still reside in Ireland. These figures clearly show that Ireland is under significant migration pressure, considering the extent of homelessness, the cost-of-living crisis, the waiting lists for basic operations and healthcare, the lack of crèches, the overcrowding in schools and the lack of transport for children attending school, and the lack of accommodation for students. The list goes on. Given this reality, will the Minister confirm whether Ireland intends to apply for an exemption or a deduction under

the pact, and if not, why not? This is a critical question for transparency and for ensuring Ireland's interests are properly represented.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** When people came here from Ukraine, the Irish people opened their houses and their hearts to help them. Many people from Ukraine have actually integrated and are staying here. They are working, contributing and paying tax here. Many people of different nationalities have immigrated into this country from Poland and other countries. They are now part of our workforce. They are now working here. They came here through a process, with documentation and everything, and they are working. They are seeing other nationalities coming in here that are abusing the situation. Due to the hatred that is being put out there, they now feel that people are looking at them as if they are here illegally. They are people who came into this country and are working. We asked them to come here, their lives are here and the next generation is here now. They are being tarred with the one brush. They are very upset with what the Government has done with people who have come here with no documentation, and that documentation has not been looked for. People who came here from other countries and have been working here, providing for people who are vulnerable, are disappointed with the Government for not vetting people coming into this country.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** We need to continue showing solidarity with Ukraine in the face of this unjust war. The systematic targeting by Russia of civilians, medical facilities, maternity hospitals, and schools, along with the mass abduction and indoctrination of Ukrainian children, shows all the hallmarks of genocide. Ukraine is still facing an ongoing existential threat but is bravely fighting back against a much bigger aggressor. Almost four years on from the Russian invasion, we need to continue standing with Ukraine. In this context, like others, I welcome President Zelenskyy's impending visit next month. Hopefully, he will be able to make it over.

On 26 October, the European Council reaffirmed its continued unwavering support for Ukraine's independent sovereignty and territorial integrity. This needs to continue in a tangible way. We in Ireland must maintain our non-lethal military support. We must continue to assist Ukrainian refugees and offer protection and opportunities as a free nation. There are debates, of course, about the levels of support on an individual basis, some of which are valid and some are dog-whistling. However, we must always remember that we have Ukrainian guests with much to offer us, especially at a time when we cannot fill many types of jobs. We must build on the work that has been done to further integrate Ukrainians into the Irish way of life. We must provide supports but also incentives for them to work and improve their language skills further. We should educate them about our culture and our society. The same applies to any group that is genuinely fleeing persecution and war. However, we have a special duty to support Ukraine in different ways as an EU member state given our military neutrality.

That said, we need to upgrade our own defences, for example by investing in cheaper drone technology and other weaponry to defend our sea border and monitor ongoing Russian incursions into our economic zone. We are not immune to Russian aggression, whether in the form of submarines or the so-called shadow fleet, cyberwarfare or troll farms. Until that regime changes, we have to do what we can to protect ourselves, support our fellow EU member states, support Ukraine and realise we are all in this together as Europeans.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I want to focus on a number of aspects of the Ukraine war and how it is so important to us here in Ireland. I want to speak first about the massive numbers who have died on both sides of the conflict. It is estimated that between 200,000 and 500,000 people have died on the Russian side and about half that on the Ukrainian side. This is a staggering number. It is happening in a European country that borders several EU countries. For the life of me I cannot understand why it is barely spoken about here nor mentioned in our main media outlets. Are the lives of hundreds of thousands of young men not important?

Second, I want to raise the issue of missing children. Latest reports from experts at Yale University estimate that as many as 35,000 children may be held in Russia and its occupied territories. There is a network of 43 Russian facilities to which Ukrainian children have been moved since February 2022. It is thought that many have been sent to military camps or foster care or even adopted by Russian families. The Yale team has been able to establish the identities of thousands of children. It is likely the largest child abduction in war since the Second World War.

Third, I want to talk about Ireland taking in people from Ukraine. Ireland has taken in more than 100,000 refugees from Ukraine. We have taken in by far the most in western Europe *per capita* and more in absolute numbers than France. This is commendable. However, I wonder whether we have really helped Ukraine by attracting some people who may have stayed. For example, in Ukraine businesses already crippled by blackouts and Russian missiles are suffering from a severe labour shortage. Most will never return.

Fourth, I want to discuss the financing of Ukraine. Unless something changes, Ukraine is expected to have no money at the end of next February. In February of this year, after Mr. Trump entered the White House, monthly American financial allocations to Ukraine stopped. Ukraine has now borrowed as much as it can. It has an official fiscal deficit of about one fifth of GDP. Public debt has doubled as a share of GDP since before the war to about 110%. Ukraine cannot borrow any more. Its last hope is Europe. The annual war effort requires €100 billion, which is equal to about half of Ukraine's GDP. Europe's NATO members need to step up and fund Ukraine. It would go a long way to ensuring Europe's independence from the US. The alternative would be for Ukraine to lose the war, making Russia an even bigger threat. Spread across all NATO members, this is manageable. Europe has no choice. It also has a chance to speed up Europe's effort to establish its military and financial independence from America. Europe's economy is ten times the size of Russia's. Russia's initial war boom has now given way to stagflation, with growth at almost zero, labour shortages, inflation of 8% and interest rates of 16.5%. Another few years of this would probably trigger an economic and banking crisis in Russia. If Europe can demonstrate to Russia that it will underwrite the war for at least that long, Russia may think differently. Europe needs to remain united in the face of Russia's aggression. Ukraine is too big to fail.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this very important matter this evening. I, like everyone else, commiserate with the people of Ukraine who have gone through so much. What is going on is terrible as is the length of time it has been going on.

We have to recognise that Ireland has played a major part in welcoming, as was said previously, up to 120,000 people from Ukraine. Of course, I welcome people who are working

here, are in employment here and can stand on their own two feet here. However, when we read the headlines in the newspaper today, we see that Ireland paid over €1 billion last year and several billions for the past three or four years. We come in here day after day asking the Government for different things and pleading for our own needy people, whether the elderly, people in hospitals, children or whatever, and invariably we are told we do not have the money for different things. I cannot see how we can sustain this level of spending. Unless the Government can explain otherwise, that it has a separate fund or whatever, I cannot see how we are going to sustain spending that kind of money.

Of course, we have a housing crisis here. At the start of the war the Government decided to pay towards accommodation for Ukrainians. It started with €800 tax free but it is now €600. I do not mind if the Government does the same for our people who were brought up here, are trying to live here and continue to stay here. However, it steadfastly refuses to give €600 per month to our people. That is not fair. I have to fight for our people too, and I make no bones about it. If the Government can give €600 a month tax free for a Ukrainian family, it should be able to do it for Irish people as well. I know what is happening with the housing list in Kerry and I understand very well the number of people who are left behind. If people's earnings go over a threshold of €37,000, they are thrown off the housing list.

Another thing at stake here is our neutrality. I remember as a young fella hearing Éamon de Valera on the radio chastising Winston Churchill for trying to get us into the Second World War. He gave him his answer. We should keep that neutrality. I was disappointed when the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, said we are training Ukrainians to make soldiers out of them and we must stand with Ukrainians. We must maintain our neutrality whatever happens. We have no army. The Minister of State talked about us winning the war. Those were his words here. The Taoiseach said Russia must be made accountable. We cannot make it accountable.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Healy Rae's time is up. I call Deputy Heneghan.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** When we talk about strategy or security policy, we have to begin thinking about the reality of this war. I have friends who have come from Ukraine and friends whose families are still in Ukraine. According to the United Nation's report, and I am sure the Minister of State is well-aware of this as I have spoken to him about it before, the number of civilian casualties - this is something we are seeing across the world, that is, civilians being drawn into wars they had nothing to do with starting - is devastating. Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022, more than 53,000 civilians have been killed or injured. These are families and communities. These are my friends' families. It is difficult to see this and to speak to these people. At least 148 civilians were killed in October. Many players on the rugby team I play for are of Ukrainian descent. It is hitting us close to home as we are EU allies.

The recent attacks in October and November triggered nationwide blackouts. What we are seeing with these targets is that we need to look at our own systems and protection. We should look at what Russia has been doing to Ukraine. That is something I continually pushed for last week with the former Minister for foreign affairs, the now Minister for Finance and the Tánaiste, regarding our offshore cables and how we need to protect them and, hopefully, decentralise our energy systems to prepare for this.

To return to speaking about Ukraine, we have to be honest about this. Russia is engaging in hybrid aggression across the Continent, targeting electricity cables and gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea. Europe's energy infrastructure has become a priority target. We have seen repeated incidents involving Russian-affiliated vessels interfering with various submarine cables. In December 2024, the Finnish authorities apprehended the *Eagle S* after it cut the Estlink 2 cable between Finland and Estonia. That ship had military grade detection equipment on its hull. That was not an accident; it was a message.

Are we prepared? Our Defence Forces really needs to look into how we can look after our seas. How can the EU, as a whole, protect our energy? This obviously matters for Ireland as an island that depends almost entirely on undersea cables, although we have a lot onshore, for our connectivity, our banking and our economy. These cables carry all of these transactions and if they were to be damaged, it would be absolutely devastating. We need to have back-up protection. If there was hybrid interference or direct sabotage, the consequences would be immediate and severe. As I am sure the Minister of State is well aware, every European warning and Baltic incident tells us the same thing. We cannot assume we are safe simply because we are offshore or because we are not part of a military alliance. Neutrality without capability is vulnerability.

How do we respond? One part is obvious. Our Defence Forces need the capability to monitor, defend and respond to both cyber and physical threats. As a neutral, sovereign nation, strengthening our defence is very important and a necessity. I go back to private wires in the sense that local energy hubs supporting long-duration storage give communities and critical services back-up in case we are attacked. By decentralising supply and removing single points of failure, we make Ireland far more secure against these hybrid attacks.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Neale Richmond):** I thank the Deputies from all sides of the House and Ministers for their contributions today. I will reply to some of the points in order to provide clarification but from the get-go, I welcome the overwhelming, if not total sense of solidarity between this House and the people of Ukraine, particularly from opposition Members who recognise this is an utterly illegal and brutal war by the Russian Federation under the yoke of Vladimir Putin. It was initiated solely by the Russian Federation. The response to this brutal war has been remarkable. We are seeing unparalleled levels of European solidarity, both European Union and broader European solidarity, recognising the absolute need to provide that support for Ukraine.

It is important to clarify a few points and I do so respectfully. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, did not say we are looking to train Ukrainian soldiers for war.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I am just providing a clarification; I am not looking to get into a debate on it. We send members of the Defence Forces to train in de-mining activities. That is not training people for war; it is removing land mines from potentially targeting civilians. I am not taking issue with the other points the Deputy raised, but that specific one is particularly important.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** You should not be taking sides and that is it. Standing with Ukraine is antagonising the Russians.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** Respectfully, we are not taking sides as a military neutral.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** You said it there. I wrote down what you said.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** Respectfully, I answered the Deputy on one technical point, which is clear. Training people to remove land mines is not taking sides in a war. The national position is that we are not politically neutral; we are militarily neutral. If the Deputy thinks it is taking sides to remove land mines from blowing up women and children, that it is a different interpretation of what we are doing.

Deputy Lawless made the point the triple lock goes back to 2011, when actually it goes back to the 1960 Defence Act. I say that deliberately because it is important to provide clarity.

Deputy Collins managed to make a three-minute contribution to a debate on Ukraine and not mention Ukraine once. This is really important. Other people discussed immigration and tied it to Ukraine. I have no issue with that. People are right to raise issues and points of clarification, as Deputy Healy-Rae did. I respect his right to do so and acknowledge the points he raised, but when people bring up the EU migration pact, which has nothing specifically to do with providing shelter for up to 118,000 Ukrainian refugees, it takes issue with the essence of what we are trying to debate.

Deputy Heneghan raised a number of points requiring a specific response. One was on the need to strengthen our capabilities as a militarily neutral sovereign country. I fully agree with him and that is why the review of the Commission on the Defence Forces laid out three options and the Government is pursuing the second option. There has been a massive increase in resources to our cyberdefence capability. There has been the setting-up of a maritime defence system to make sure those undersea cables can be monitored. We need to acknowledge the requirement for co-operation on defence. That does not mean joining any alliances or anything like that. It is basic common sense that when we talk of cables that serve the entire Continent of Europe from North America, we speak to our neighbours in Europe. That is why we have a memorandum of understanding -----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Saying things like we are standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine, we cannot stand with anyone. We could not keep up-----

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I only have ten minutes and referred to Deputy Healy-Rae's point five minutes ago. I am referring to Deputy Heneghan's questions. That is why we have a memorandum of understanding on defence with the United Kingdom and why we co-operate in sharing information with the tech companies and the private sector. It is to provide those cables. I acknowledge, first and foremost, that we need to do more.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Ye need to be more careful about what ye are saying-----

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** Ah Jesus, Deputy Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** -----and the way ye are saying it.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** What I mean when I say we need to do more is that we need to resource our Defences Forces more and continue investing in new equipment. Respectfully, I answered one technical query Deputy Healy-Rae asked. I moved on five minutes ago. I am talking about a situation that impacts his constituents as much as it impacts mine. He was given his time; I am given my time to respond for the Government. Respectfully, I will continue without interruption, if that is all right.

When we talk about solidarity with Ukraine and the cost of providing supports to the Ukrainian people, being humanitarian and welcoming people into our homes and homesteads, we also have to ask the cost of not doing that. What is the cost of a Russian victory in Ukraine? Whether we like it or not, or believe in some form of splendid geographic isolation, a Russian victory across Ukraine would have a massive impact on the Continent of Europe and on the European Union, of which we are a member. If Ukraine falls, where is next - the Baltic states, Poland? We have already seen transgressions of drones into European Union airspace, hybrid warfare activity and systems attacked in Estonia. Our own health system was hacked a number of years ago and sent offline by a criminal gang that was operating with impunity in the Russian Federation. We see levels of disinformation and misinformation online throughout the electoral process in countries like the Netherlands, France and Austria. As I have stated before, over 50 Members of this House find themselves sanctioned by the Russian Federation due to the diktat of the ambassador in Orwell Road simply for saying clearly that the Russian war is illegal.

There are tools for accountability. When we talk of sanctions and enter into the 19th round of EU sanctions against Russia, that is accountability. When we talk of freezing Russian assets, that is accountability. The Irish Government's position is clear that there is the ability to use the proceeds of frozen assets to pay for the repair and reconstruction of the Russian damage in Ukraine. That is a policy we are keen on in terms of accountability. When we set up the tribunal at the Council of Europe, that was backed. I travelled to Ukraine and to Lviv for the signing ceremony to which Ireland, with a number of countries from Europe and around the world, were party. There has to be accountability. There has to be work in the international criminal courts because Russia's invasion of Ukraine is illegal. We see consistent reports of Russian activity within Ukrainian territory. The Taoiseach detailed at length the forced kidnapping of children from the Ukrainian territory into Russia. We see attacks on food and energy, which are deemed war crimes. There has to be accountability for that.

The Irish people have made it clear that they stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine. They have opened their hearts and homes. The Government has made it clear that we stand with our European friends and colleagues in support of a fellow European nation that has had its sovereignty invaded by an illegal force, which has breached repeated international treaties to which it is party, as is Ukraine.

We look to the future and the future has to be clear. We want peace on this Continent because the impacts of the war are being materially felt by Irish people on a daily basis. Our grocery and energy prices are high due to the inflationary process of Russia's war in Ukraine. Ukraine was the breadbasket of Europe in terms of the production of grain. That has been severely hampered by the acts of Russia. Ukraine was a key provider of natural gas and a key facilitator of the travelling of natural gas and other raw minerals across the European Continent. Energy

prices have gone up due to Russia's illegal invasion and attacking of pipelines, among other things. This war, as well as being horrific, is taking so many lives.

Deputy Heneghan speaks of the Ukrainian community he represents. I take issue in that I do not think he quite plays at the same level as the Soroka brothers but I know they are members of the same club. We are talking about people seeing their families wiped out and seeing their husbands, sons and fathers being sent to war because they have no choice. If you really want to talk brass tacks, this hurts Irish people in the pocket as well as being a potential existential threat to the future of European safety and security and the freedom and democracy we all cherish in this Republic.

We must continue our support of the Ukrainian people until there is peace in Ukraine that allows for the reconstruction of Ukraine and the reintroduction of Ukraine into the global world order and, equally, until we see Ukraine in due course take its rightful seat as a fellow member of the European Union. That is something Ireland supports. Ireland supports European enlargement more generally, but having Ukraine as part of the European Union would be good for Ukraine, the European Union and, crucially, Ireland. I thank the Deputies from all parties and none who contributed to this debate.

### **Message from Select Committee**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Votes 20 to 22, inclusive, and 24.

### **Mercosur Trade Agreement: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises:

- the threat posed to Irish agriculture, the environment and human rights by the proposed Mercosur Trade Agreement;
- the benefits of Irish agriculture to the Irish economy and its importance to rural communities throughout the country;
- that Irish farmers play a vital role as custodians of the land and promote biodiversity and work to protect the environment;
- that Irish agricultural products is acknowledged for its high standards and is exported around the world;
- the very high environmental standards that Irish and European Union (EU) goods are produced to and regulations that Irish and EU farmers must adhere to in relation to animal welfare standards traceability;

- the need for sustainable and fair international trade agreements to develop new markets for Irish and EU products;
- that tariff reduction can lead to positive outcomes for the public, when implemented in a fair and sustainable way;
- the need for produce to be imported into the EU to adhere to the same environmental and animal welfare standards and traceability regulations as producers in Ireland and the EU must adhere too; and
- the various agreements, declarations and frameworks which the Irish State is a signature to, including but not limited to the Rome Declaration on World Food Security, the Paris Agreement, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework;

notes with concern:

- that the European Commission (EC) concluded negotiations with four Mercosur countries on 6th December, 2024 on the EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement;
- that on 3rd September, 2025, the EC split the EU-Mercosur Agreement into two separate proposals - meaning that national parliaments will have no say on the ratification of the interim Trade Agreement element of the Partnership Agreement;
- the impact that importing 99,000 tonnes of beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry into the EU will have on Irish and EU farmers;
- that the Mercosur Agreement is at odds with EU and Irish domestic climate legislation and will lead to greater deforestation and environmental destruction in the Mercosur countries;
- that the EU has delayed implementation of Regulation 2023/1115 on deforestation in part to aid the ratification of the Mercosur Trade Agreement;
- that imported agricultural products from Mercosur countries are often produced using toxic chemicals that have been banned in the EU for decades, and a 2024 EU audit found that Brazil cannot reliably trace or guarantee hormone free beef, yet the Mercosur Agreement will allow exporters to self-certify compliance with EU standards;
- that the Mercosur Trade Agreement will further incentivise human rights violations against indigenous peoples in the Mercosur countries and the theft of their land in order to obtain more land for cattle farming;
- that the bilateral safeguard proposed by the EC only applies for a transitional period of 12 years and the apparent weakness of the mechanism when it comes to protecting farmers;
- that the triggering mechanism for the bilateral safeguard does not apply to situations of risk to public health, environmental destruction or indigenous dispossession;

- that the Mercosur Trade Agreement would undermine our food security objectives and threaten generational renewal; and

- the lack of engagement by the Irish Government with other EU member states in relation to the threats that the Mercosur trade deal poses to Irish and EU farmers and the substantial environmental, human rights and public health risks that the Agreement poses; and

calls on the Government to:

- publicly reject the Mercosur Trade Agreement as it threatens the future of Irish agriculture and the Irish family farm and poses huge threats to the environment, public health and human rights;

- mandate its representatives at Council level to vote against the Mercosur Trade Agreement at its meeting in December 2025; and

- work with likeminded member states to form a blocking minority at Council level.

The Mercosur trade deal is bad for Irish agriculture, European consumers and the global environment. It is a deal that has been spoken about for a long time. It has been negotiated between the EU and the Mercosur countries in Latin America for over 25 years. Those negotiations are now over. There are no more negotiations for this deal. The deal is the deal. It is done, or so we are told. It will be voted on in an EU Council meeting in the next few weeks.

The final EU-Mercosur trade agreement has been widely criticised for harming Irish and EU farmers, undermining climate goals, potentially affecting public health and bypassing democratic scrutiny.

8 o'clock

This is a bad deal for Ireland and a bad deal for the EU. The threat to Irish agriculture is very real, especially to our suckler and beef industries and to our poultry sector, which is important and under huge pressure the moment, as the Minister will be aware, with the bird flu pandemic sweeping across the country, potentially causing huge harm. I am sure he is aware this deal is bad for Ireland as this has been reported over the years.

As it currently stands, Mercosur beef is being imported into the EU. In total, approximately 105,000 tonnes of beef and 68,000 tonnes of frozen beef are being imported into the EU annually. Some 58,000 tonnes of this beef has a tariff of 20% on it at the moment under the Hilton quota. The rest has a tariff of between 40% and 50%. The Minister can therefore imagine how cheaply Mercosur countries are producing this substandard beef when they can make profits like this selling beef at a 40% to 50% tariff. Under the Mercosur deal, 58,000 tonnes will have zero tariff and a further 99,000 tonnes will be at a 7.5% tariff. Anything over that will be up to 40% or 50%. There is no limit to the volume of beef that can come from Brazil into the European Union. There is simply a limit to how much will be tariff free or have a low tariff. That is what this deal does.

The Minister and I are aware of the issues with South American beef. Animal welfare standards are considerably poorer than in Ireland and the rest of the EU and there is no

traceability of cattle and no tagging of animals at all. Ireland and the EU have the highest standards of animal welfare and food security in the world and this agreement weakens the EU's food safety checks and auditing powers, which will allow importation of products produced with banned pesticides, hormones and antibiotics. This increases the risk of unsafe agricultural products entering the EU market.

This deal is disastrous for the environment. It is seen as incompatible with the EU's Paris Agreement commitments. It is expected to increase exports of deforestation-linked products such as beef and soya, driving the destruction of the Amazon and raising greenhouse gas emissions. The EU's attempt to appease member states that are opposed to this deal by proposing safeguards and a so-called handbrake clause does nothing to protect Irish or EU farmers. There would have to be a decline of 10% in the EU market price to trigger the safeguards and there is a high legal threshold that requires proof that the decline in price is a consequence or result of imports from Mercosur. This safeguard is not preventative. It addresses harm only after it has been caused and does not fix the structural issues, including unequal production standards and environmental costs. If this deal is ratified, it will result in the loss of jobs in Irish agriculture and we will see further decline in the Irish suckler industry, which is already under huge strain. We have seen declining numbers in the suckler herd, particularly in the north west and along the western seaboard.

We are trying to promote generational renewal in Irish agriculture but there is no point in incentivising young farmers to take over the farm on the one hand and pulling the rug out from under them on the other by supporting the Mercosur trade deal. Irish farmers cannot compete with cheap beef from South America that is substandard, with no traceability regulations and poor animal welfare standards, produced at the cost of the environment.

Irish farmers cannot be sacrificed for German cars to be sold in South America. The Government has neglected its responsibility when it comes to defending Irish farmers and has sat back. It has a wait and see approach to the Mercosur trade deal. Its response has always been that it is opposed to the deal in its current form. Well, negotiating is over. The deal is not going to change and in the next four weeks the Government must stand up for Irish farmers and reject the Mercosur trade deal. This deal can only be stopped if the Government engages with like-minded member states and forms a blocking minority at EU Council level.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** I express my deep condolences to the family of a Waterford man who tragically lost his life in a farming incident this week. It is a stark reminder that farming remains one of the most dangerous occupations in Ireland. I welcome the people in the Public Gallery who represent different farming organisations.

I commend my colleague, Deputy Martin Kenny, and the wider Sinn Féin team on their work on this motion. Most important, I commend them on listening to the deep concerns of the farming community and bringing their voices, concerns and worries about the future of rural communities to the Dáil. Let us be clear: Sinn Féin will ensure their voices are always heard in this Chamber and not left outside the gates of Leinster House.

The Mercosur trade agreement is not some abstract trade policy. It is a direct attack on Irish agriculture, our family farmers and rural communities. Farms like mine in south Kilkenny and that of the Minister in Kildare have been passed down from one generation to the next. Like the Minister's children, my children are growing up on a suckler farm, like so many sons and

daughters across Ireland who have grown up farming and working the land. It is much more than a job; it is a way of life. It is a passion that has ensured our farmers reach higher and higher standards. I want a future where our sons and daughters on farms across Ireland can make a decent living while producing the highest quality of food. I give them our word that we will damn well fight for that future.

We should be under no illusion. The Mercosur agreement will create a race to the bottom. For the wider public, the changes will be subdued. Beef that is 100% Irish will start disappearing from menus. Instead, people across Ireland will be served beef that is not traceable and not grass-fed, but reared indoors on banned growth hormones and genetically modified feed. It will devastate the rainforests. Hundreds of thousands of acres are being cleared in South America right now, specifically to produce more of this cheap beef for the EU market. This undermines everything we stand for. Food produced in Ireland and the EU is held to the highest standards. Mercosur countries could not be further from our high standards. Their practices would be considered a public health risk if they were used in the EU. This deal imports their lowest standards and puts the public at risk. Let us be clear: Mercosur is a bad deal for Irish farmers and a bad deal for public health and must be rejected.

Supporting the Mercosur trade agreement would be a betrayal of Irish farming and rural communities. It would involve selling out those who have often stood with the Minister, just so German businessmen can make millions of euro more selling cars and chemicals to South America. That will be the Minister's legacy if a firm stand is not taken now. He has a clear choice. I urge him to stand with ordinary people and stop Ireland being sold out for cheap imports and to protect Irish agriculture by backing this motion.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael sold out the Irish fishing industry and is set now to sell out Irish agriculture. The Government faces a simple but serious choice. Will it stand with Irish farmers, rural communities and our domestic food sector or will it allow the Mercosur trade deal to sell them out?

Much was said by the Government in the past year and in the run-up to the general election about opposing the Mercosur deal, but the real test is upon it. Let us call the Mercosur deal what it is. It is a bad deal for our beef and suckler farmers, for the environment, for the world and for Ireland. I welcome those in the Public Gallery from the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, ICSA, the Irish Farmers Association, IFA and other organisations. Every farming organisation in this country opposes the Mercosur deal. Every farmer who depends on a fair price, strong standards and a level playing field knows exactly what this agreement will mean. The EU will allow 99,000 tonnes of beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry to flood into the European market, much of it produced under standards that would be illegal here. Irish farmers meet the highest levels of traceability, animal welfare and environmental regulation anywhere in the world. There is no equivalent system in Mercosur countries. There are no checks. There is no transparency and no balance. Cattle are not even tagged in many cases. Hormones, pesticides and antibiotics that are banned here and are illegal to use in the European Union are routinely used in production in Mercosur countries; yet the Government will allow that product to compete directly with Irish beef. It is not just unfair; it is a threat to public health and food security.

We are told to trust the so-called safeguard clause but it is nothing more than a political smokescreen. It will not protect Irish farm incomes and will not reverse the structural damage this agreement will cause. Environmentally, the consequences are devastating. As mentioned, the impact on the Amazon at a time of runaway climate change cannot be overstated. Tonight, Sinn Féin is asking this House to send a clear, united message, that Ireland says "No" to the Mercosur trade agreement. We are asking the Minister and his Government to send a clear message to the European Union, the Council and the Commission that we oppose the Mercosur trade agreement and that the Irish State will not accept it as a deal. We are asking the Government to stop hiding behind excuses, to grow a backbone and to stand up for our family farmers and rural communities, and to work with those European states that are also opposed to this when we come to the Council meeting in December.

The Government can still choose to defend Irish agriculture. It is not too late to defend Irish standards and Irish jobs. It should support this motion, stand with farmers, and reject Mercosur.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Mercosur is a rotten deal for people and for the planet and it must be rejected. The Government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the regional Independents, including the Healy-Rae brothers, is selling out Ireland, abandoning our farmers and signing a blank cheque for environmental degradation and destruction the world over because there is no doubt this is just the beginning and it will put the farm families out of business. They are rolling out the red carpet for imports, packed with banned pesticides, hormones and antibiotics and gambling with our agriculture, public health and the future of the planet.

It is a fundamental threat to our sovereignty. I refuse to accept that the largest free trade agreement in history can go ahead without the approval of national parliaments. It is undemocratic and a betrayal of the Irish people. The Government must be honest that this Mercosur deal is fundamentally incompatible with climate science. It exposes the hypocrisy of the Government, von der Leyen and the Commission, in allowing 99,000 tonnes of untraceable South American beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry into the EU market at reduced tariffs. These imports are not subject to the same standards. They fall far short of the high bar we expect from Irish farmers, who produce high-quality food for EU citizens and at the same time provide public goods. This is all being sacrificed for the benefit of global corporations in the automotive and pharma sector to sell cars, insurance and wine. The Government is signing up to a deal that will decimate the Earth's lungs and will reward production linked to the deforestation of the Amazon and the Sierra Nevada, two of the most critical ecosystems on our planet.

I ask the Government, including the Healy-Rae brothers, if they stand with family farmers and indigenous people in the Amazon, and the shared future of the planet? Do they believe in democracy or will they sell out for corporate greed? It is their moment of choice. Which side are they on?

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I have often said that our farmers deserve three things: fair prices, a fair CAP, and fair play. On all three, successive Governments have failed. On prices, we still have the diktats coming from factories and retailers, and we have never got a stranglehold on the conglomerate interests that are controlling the prices received. On CAP, we now have a situation where farmers are receiving fewer payments but are being asked to do more and more every year.

What do I mean by fair play? The first thing I mean by that is a recognition that the farmers in the Gallery tonight and across this country produce food to the highest standards and with the highest number of regulations in the world. Nowhere outside of the European Union matches the controls on farmers in respect of the climate, the environment, animal welfare and biodiversity. Yet, while they are expected to meet all of those obligations, they are also expected to compete with states and farmers which do not have to adhere to the same level of regulation. That is unfair. Not only are they expected to compete, we are now being faced with a trade deal that wants to tip the balance in favour of those farming organisations that do not adhere to the same regulations.

The approach by successive Governments on this matter has been very cynical. I have heard Ministers from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the past decade and a half indicating that they oppose the Mercosur deal. They never say that the only reason Mercosur is on the table at all is an Irish Government signed up to a negotiating mandate and permitted the European Commission to open negotiations when it could have said, "Stop" when a unanimity principle was in place. They do not say that there were countless occasions over the past decade where the Irish Government could have stopped the Mercosur negotiations in their tracks and failed to do so. They do not say, loud and clear, so that the European Commission can hear, that Ireland will not accept a lunacy whereby, in this House, we have people talking about cutting herds in Ireland and Europe, while at the same time importing hundreds of thousands of tonnes of beef from the far end of the world, and literally mowing down rainforests to produce that beef. The lunacy has to stop now. We need clear, unequivocal language that the European Commission hears. We, the Irish people, will not accept the Mercosur trade deal.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** We have had months and months of hand-wringing and vague objections to the agreement in its current form. The fact is that the negotiations are finished, the deal is done and the Government must decide whether it is for it or against it. From an enterprise, tourism and employment perspective, I recognise exactly what is at stake here. Irish agriculture underpins tens of thousands of rural jobs, small businesses, agritourism ventures, transport, food processing and hospitality. When the family farm is undermined, the entire rural economy is undermined. The deal would flood the EU market with 99,000 tonnes of beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry. Irish farmers are required to meet the highest animal welfare, traceability and environmental standards in the world but now they will be forced to compete with cheaper, substandard imports, produced with hormones and chemicals banned here for decades.

The European Commission's own audit in 2024 confirmed that Brazil cannot guarantee hormone-free beef, yet under Mercosur, exporters can self-certify. This is absolutely reckless. Let us be clear that this is not just an attack on Irish farmers; it is an attack on our climate commitments, on indigenous peoples in South America whose lands are taken for cattle-ranching, and on the global fight against deforestation in the Amazon.

Ministers say that they oppose the deal in its current form but that line is meaningless. The deal on the table is the deal. There is no more negotiating. The only question is whether will vote for it or against it. Farmers know this. The IFA, ICSA and INHFA know this. Every farming organisation in the country is opposed to this. The so-called emergency brake is not

worth the paper it is written on. It is temporary, weak, and entirely inadequate to prevent job losses, market distortion or the slow death of the family farm. There is much more I could say but I need to hand over to my colleague. The Minister needs to stop dithering. He needs to reject this agreement publicly and to work with like-minded states to build a blocking minority to this disastrous deal.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** All of my life in politics, I have talked to farming families who are asked to adhere to the highest standards possible. That is why we have world-class products when we talk about grass-fed Irish beef, the pride of the world. We are the highest exports in the European Union. Our farmers have been asked to bend over backwards again and again to comply with environmental standards. They have been held up as a scapegoat around climate change again and again. That is what they have had to put up with. It is galling and sickening, therefore, to have the same European Commission that demanded the highest standards possible in the world for our produce to then have produce at a whole different scale competing with us. This is absolute madness.

I commend Deputies Kenny and Newsome Drennan on bringing the motion forward. I thank all the representatives of the farming organisations in the Public Gallery tonight. They are standing up for their communities and saying not to take them for granted. The Government should not take their support for granted. They are putting it to the Minister to stand up to the hypocrisy and the double standards, so that everything that is said by the European Commission and all the agricultural policies are held to scrutiny like never before, and that the Minister should build support across Europe to stop this and put an end to it, to say that we have standards in Europe and that if you want to come into this market and compete, you must reach those standards too. It could not be simpler. It really is straightforward. It is over to the Minister now. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon):** I thank Deputies for raising this issue. I acknowledge the presence of those in the Public Gallery for the debate. I intend to divide my address into two parts. On behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, I will speak to the broader issues of trade before addressing some of the specific agricultural elements of the Mercosur trade deal.

Trade and our relationships with partners around the world are a central feature of the Irish economic model. Ireland's story is one of openness - openness to the world, to trade, to new ideas and to new partnerships. Unlike nations whose wealth is rooted in vast natural resources or the legacies of conquest, Ireland's prosperity comes from something different - the talent of our people, our capacity for innovation, high quality agricultural produce and an outward-facing economy that looks to the world rather than to itself. We are a small country with a global voice, a trusted partner known for being honest, principled and constructive.

Our membership of the European Union is central to that story. It amplifies our voice, strengthens our influence and enables us to advocate for solutions that work for Ireland, Europe and the wider global economy. However, we cannot be complacent. The international environment is more volatile, more unpredictable and more transactional than at any time in recent decades. Through the EU, we have been part of an expanding network of free trade agreements that create opportunities for exports and investment, support jobs and growth at home, and uphold EU standards in food safety, animal and plant health and environmental

protection. These agreements help to promote EU values globally, from labour standards to human rights to climate action. For a nation that exports 90% of the food and drink we produce, trade is crucial. Indeed, Irish agriculture has directly benefited from many of the EU trade agreements. As an example, Irish agrifood exports to Japan have increased significantly since the EU-Japan economic partnership came into effect in 2019. For context, within five short years, by 2024, Irish agrifood exports to Japan were valued at €162 million across categories such as dairy, pigmeat and beef, trade only made possible by that EU-Japan economic partnership.

Ireland's economic strength is rooted in openness. We have enjoyed robust economic performance in recent years, with near full employment and real jobs growth across every region. Our action plans on market diversification and on competitiveness and productivity outline how we will continue to build resilience and ensure Ireland remains an attractive and competitive location for investment and job creation. In short, trade is essential for Ireland. It is the only credible way for us to sustain the jobs and investment our people rely on. However, balance will always be essential.

We have always been clear that EU trade agreements must defend our most vulnerable sectors and that our farmers' livelihoods must not be undermined through weak or ineffective environmental standards in other countries. In that regard, Ireland has, over a number of years, raised specific concerns about the EU-Mercosur agreement, both regarding our agricultural sensitivities and the strength of the original commitments around trade and sustainability. In September, the European Commission presented its final package of proposals on the EU-Mercosur agreement for adoption by the Council and the European Parliament. This followed some 25 years of negotiations.

Foremost in my mind have been the sensitivities in agriculture in particular, and especially in the beef sector, as well as the concerns around trade and sustainability. As part of the agreement, the EU will grant Mercosur a beef quota at a reduced tariff of 99,000 tonnes, phased in over a six-year period. An economic and sustainability impact assessment, commissioned by the Government, estimated that the resulting increase in beef imports into the EU could lead to a reduction in the value of Irish beef output of between €44 million and €55 million. Concerns have also been raised that Mercosur countries do not operate to the same standards in the production of food, with the potential for negative impacts on the environment, animal welfare and food safety. Ireland and like-minded member states have repeatedly raised such concerns with the Commission and pushed for increased protections for our farmers.

The Commission has set out flanking measures to the overall agreement, focused on addressing concerns raised by the agricultural sector. These include a new legal act covering safeguards for sensitive agricultural products, a financial safety net for farmers, and stronger commitments on production standards and sanitary and phytosanitary compliance.

Ireland has also sought stronger trade and sustainability commitments. We have been clear that the original 2019 text did not go far enough. We raised these concerns repeatedly. We welcomed the fact that the Commission returned to negotiations with Mercosur to strengthen the sustainability chapter.

The resulting legal instrument agreed in December last year seeks to address the concerns raised by Ireland and other EU partners. These changes must be assessed carefully and

comprehensively. We have repeatedly emphasised Ireland's requirements for credible, legally-binding commitments on matters relating to trade and sustainable development, including climate, biodiversity and deforestation protections.

The Government also has concerns about the preferential access being given to Mercosur if South American farmers are not subject to the same sustainable farming standards as our own farmers. It is important to note, in terms of food safety, animal and plant health - SPS standards, as they are known - that the EU's standards are among the highest in the world. The Commission has consistently stated that these are not up for negotiation. However, production standards go beyond SPS standards and take in other issues, such as environmental sustainability. Irish and EU farmers are held to a very high standard in terms of how they produce food. I have spoken on numerous occasions about concerns about preferential access being granted when farmers in the Mercosur bloc may not be subject to the same sustainable farming standards as our own. As Minister, I have had the opportunity to raise these and other concerns at Agri-Fish Council meetings since my appointment earlier this year. I have also held numerous bilateral meetings on the margins of the Council and, as recently as yesterday, I met again in Brussels with my French and Italian counterparts.

The EU-Mercosur agreement is seen by many EU countries and by the European Commission as a strategic tool for economic growth, competitiveness and supply chain security. The current global trade landscape is resulting in member states reassessing their position. There is increasing pressure within the EU to move forward on this agreement despite the Government's best efforts to engage with like-minded member states on this. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and I, as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, have firmly advocated for Irish farmers at EU meetings and with the Commission. The Government has been examining the final package in its entirety to determine whether our concerns have been fully addressed and whether the necessary balance has been achieved. We have been doing this rigorously, in consultation with like-minded member states and with stakeholders, including our farming communities, who have a direct and legitimate interest in this agreement.

The Commission's recent proposal gives some clarity on the legal structure they foresee for the agreement, whereby it will be a "split" agreement. This means that the interim trade agreement, ITA, which would include the trade pillar of the agreement, can be ratified at EU level. This can be done through adoption by qualified majority vote, QMV, through the Trade Council and by a simple majority at the European Parliament. For the QMV vote, a blocking minority would be required to prevent adoption of the agreement. This requires at least four member states, representing over 35% of the EU population, voting against or abstaining on the proposal. It is fair to say that, right now, it is far from clear that a blocking minority exists.

Ireland supports open, fair, rules-based trade. We value our membership of the EU and the opportunities that being part of the largest trading bloc brings. However, we also support a balanced approach that protects our most vulnerable sectors and ensures that international agreements uphold the highest standards of sustainability, environmental protection and labour rights. Supporting open trade does not oblige us to support every trade agreement in any form. This is the approach we have taken throughout the EU-Mercosur agreement negotiating process in seeking to protect our interests and mitigate our concerns. It is the approach we have continued to take as we examine this final package.

With the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, my Department continues to examine the proposals in detail and will continue to engage with the Commission to ensure that Ireland's concerns are fully taken on board. Pending that examination and the completion of ongoing engagement, Ireland's position on the EU-Mercosur agreement remains as clearly outlined in the programme for government. The Government fully recognises the concerns raised in this motion regarding the proposed EU-Mercosur agreement, particularly in relation to Irish agriculture, the need for robust trade and sustainability commitments, and the importance of our rural economy, which every Member of this House accepts. In that context, the Government will not oppose today's motion. The Government is committed to continuing discussions and engagement with other member states and with the Commission in the coming weeks ahead of any final Council vote.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** What the Minister calls agricultural sensitivities, we see as a real threat to Irish agriculture and Irish farm families the length and breadth of our State. It is a real kick in the teeth to farmers who have to bend over backwards and work so hard to meet regulation after regulation. They have to meet a bar that is set so high, and they meet it, high as it is, yet they then see the real possibility of tens of thousands of tonnes of beef coming into the EU totally unregulated.

I grew up on a beef and suckler farm. I have lived on it my entire life. We recently had our Bord Bia inspection and audit. It is important to recognise the amount of work that goes into that. There must be a record of every receipt for every bag of meal and medicinal product purchased, every detail on every medicine for every animal, including when it was administered and the quantity, and every detail on batch numbers for feed, along with a record of every single detail that goes into the work farmers have to do day in, day out to ensure they meet standards and their traceability obligations. Every movement of every animal must be accounted for. If you have a cat on your farm, that cat has to have had a tablet. That is the standard Irish farmers and their families are held to when they face audits and inspections.

The nub of the issue here is that Irish farmers work extremely hard. They have to in order to do what they do. For a lot of them, it is about a love of the land and the farm. It is about family and generations. It is about so much more than profit, which many farmers do not make to begin with. What we have heard here tonight will not fill them with confidence. Deputy Heydon, as the Minister for agriculture in Ireland, was not in a position to say that he rejects and opposes Mercosur. He has not said that, and I do not think that will fill farmers with faith.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** Mercosur will allow the cheap importation of beef, poultry, pork, sugar and biofuels produced to lower standards than ours. Our Food Safety Authority was established after several high-profile outbreaks and deaths from food-borne illnesses, and its commitment since to openness and transparency has helped us as consumers to look for and demand healthier food. Knowing where our food comes from, its production method and its journey to our tables allows us to make decisions on quality, freshness, nutrition and environmental sustainability. More importantly, it allows us to make decisions on supporting local farmers and producers.

This deal is a threat to public health. Mercosur countries do not even tag cattle and they use hormones and antibiotics that are banned here. As a country, we worked hard to reach the high standard. Our farmers worked hard on this. What will all that hard work amount to and where

will we stand if we allow cheap imports from Mercosur countries with lower standards? Our family farms are struggling as it is, and this deal will be so bad for farmers and the production of healthier food.

When it comes to deforestation, governments only agreed to trying to prevent deforestation six years from now. Six years will bring us to the end of 2031, yet at the COP26 climate change summit our Taoiseach, along with more than 100 governments, signed a pledge promising to halt and reverse deforestation by 2030. Where does that pledge lie now? Is this going to be another broken promise? Are the lungs of our world going to continue to be decimated? How much more stored carbon is going to be released? Experts say we are at a tipping point, a point of no return.

On top of all that, this agreement would allow Mercosur countries to sue if the EU deforestation regulation or any future environmental or social legislation affected their exports to the EU. How anyone can believe this deal will be good for farmers, our country's health and our climate is beyond me.

**Deputy Ann Graves:** The Minister knows the Mercosur trade deal is bad for Ireland and Irish farmers. Before the last general election, the Government was against the agreement. Now it is time to stand up against the deal. In the EU, the Sinn Féin MEPs, Lynn Boylan and Kathleen Funchion, are standing up for Ireland and Irish farmers. Along with colleagues in the Left group, they have referred the deal to the European Court of Justice. They have asked the top European court to rule on whether the Mercosur deal is legal under EU law.

This agreement is widely criticised for undermining our climate goals and bypassing democratic scrutiny. The deal would let either side demand compensation if it believed the policies of the other side had hurt it economically, even if those policies complied with all legal and trade rules. This could be exploited to further undermine EU regulations around climate, workers' rights and health standards. The agreement puts the health of our people at risk. It will facilitate a race to the bottom in poultry and beef standards. There is no test for the antibiotics put into beef or poultry imported from Brazil. We have to take the word of rich big ranch farmers. This is simply not good enough.

This deal will have damaging consequences for the environment. It will see further deforestation in South America. It threatens the livelihood of indigenous farmers in Brazil. They have pleaded with Europe not to support this deal as it will give the big ranchers and their supporters the green light to push farmers off their land to make way for the production of beef to undermine EU farmers, including Irish farmers. This must serve as a wake-up call for the Government. Now it is time for it to make up its mind, stand up for Ireland and its farmers against this dangerous deal and say no to Mercosur.

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** Irish farmers produce some of the finest food products in the world, from our well-renowned grass-fed beef and high-quality milk products to our tillage sector produce. Irish farmers are world leaders on animal welfare and food production standards. The farming sector faces many threats, including generational renewal, the loss of the nitrates derogation and farm viability. However, the Mercosur trade deal represents a direct threat to the European export market, which many farm livelihoods depend on.

In 2024, Irish farm product exports to EU countries were valued at almost €5.9 billion and accounted for 35% of all Irish food and drink exports. With Mercosur, this export market is at risk of being flooded with cheaper, poor-quality products from South American countries. As my colleagues have said, the reality is that farmers in South American countries do not face the same strict animal welfare, traceability and environmental standards that Irish farmers face, and now we face the prospect of high-quality Irish produce being replaced by inferior products.

Any Government proposal to support this deal makes a mockery of its own regulations if it is going to allow the importation of beef from countries where there is not even tagging of many cattle, let alone anything else in the form of traceability. The Minister, when he was here, said that he had concerns about the deal, but he still could not say that he was opposed to it or that the Government will reject it. That is cowardly and unacceptable. This is a bad deal for Irish farmers. The Government must not allow Irish farmers to be undercut by South American imports, it must not allow Irish farmers to be sacrificed for the sake of German car manufacturers, and it must not allow the EU to undermine Irish agriculture yet again. Therefore, it is time for it to get off the fence. I call on it to protect Irish agriculture and reject this deal outright.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important and timely motion and thank Deputies Kenny and Newsome Drennan for tabling it. The purpose and intent of the motion is to send a clear, unequivocal message that Ireland must stand up for its farming families and rural communities by opposing the Mercosur trade deal. This agreement is a bad deal on every front. It is a bad deal for Irish agriculture because it threatens our world-class standards with an influx of substandard imports. It is a bad deal for consumers because it undermines public health, food safety and traceability. Moreover, it is a bad deal for our environment because it promotes a model of production that fuels deforestation.

All the main farming organisations stand united in their opposition to the deal, and they recognise the existential threat it poses to their members' livelihoods. The Government's response has been dangerously lacklustre. Their wait-and-see, it-will-be-all-right-on-the-night approach is a dereliction of duty. Negotiations are finished. The deal is done, but it is not too late to stop it.

The Minister had ten minutes in which to make his contribution. He used his ten minutes to say absolutely nothing. It was a running commentary using language to the effect that the Government "continues to examine" the deal and continues to engage. In his words, "It is fair to say that, right now, it is far from clear that a blocking minority exists." What about the Government's efforts to build a blocking minority?

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Why does the Government not say it "has examined" this deal, not that it "continues to examine" it? Why does it not state it will stand up for farmers and rural communities, defend their livelihoods, oppose and reject the deal, and build the blocking minority to ensure it does not pass?

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I thank Sinn Féin, including Deputy Martin Kenny, for this motion. The Labour Party will be supporting it. On behalf of the Labour Party, I welcome those from the IFA and other farming organisations in the Visitors Gallery.

I am absolutely baffled by the senior Minister's disappearance, considering that this is one of the biggest debates this Dáil has had since my election to this Chamber and affects so many rural communities and families across this country. It is so disappointing that he went away after ten minutes of absolute waffle.

One of the biggest issues of our time and of my generation is climate change. Our country and the European Union do not treat this emergency with the necessary urgency it deserves. In areas like housing, transport, data centres and production, climate change is not being treated like an emergency.

Furthermore, the engagement of a trade deal with a region where beef production is responsible for 65% of tropical deforestation is a negative path. Trade deals must serve the environment and climate protection, rather than putting the climate under greater pressure and exposing it to greater destruction. I have grown up hearing constantly from the State, activists and farmers that the distance between farm and fork should be short. We should take pride in local produce and we should strive to buy local and support local. This proposed trade deal flies in the face of that narrative.

Irish farming is not perfect. Farmers themselves will say that. It is, however, a standard bearer in terms of production and quality of produce. Irish farmers have made strenuous efforts to reduce their carbon footprints in line with Government policy and they are doing their best to help us to meet our legally binding climate targets, whether the narrative tells that or not. They have rightful concerns about their livelihoods and the value of their produce under the proposed deal.

I am concerned about the impact that an inadequately regulated market for beef from South America will have on workers' rights and the environment in Mercosur countries. We must always be cognisant of workers' rights and conditions in our trade deals, no matter where in the world they are. What should benefit workers in Europe should also benefit workers in South America. We already see the severe destruction of the rainforest and the lagging behind of workers' rights in agriculture. The fear we have is that a trade deal lacking in these areas is going to create severe problems for both workers and the environment. I am not casting negativity on South American countries. Indeed, the European Union and countries within it, including Ireland, are severely lacking in protections for workers and actions and policies to combat climate change. Perhaps this is why concern is so well founded. The European Union and Mercosur countries do not prioritise ordinary workers and the environment enough.

The beef produced in South America is not subject to the same strict requirements as beef produced in Europe in respect of traceability, animal welfare and health and safety. Beef can be produced cheaper and in greater quantity compared to here. It can also be produced without any regard to environmental standards. I am not opposed to a trade deal between the European Union and Mercosur countries, but I want the trade deals made at this level to benefit workers and ensure that our environment is protected, jobs are not lost and family farms and farmers' livelihoods are protected. The value of the beef sector in Ireland must also be protected internationally. That is why we would welcome a genuine partnership between the EU and

Mercosur, as long as it is built on strong workers' rights, environmental protection and the security of our farming industry. The proposed deal, however, does not convince me in that regard.

The agriculture and farming sector holds a particular importance in rural Ireland. Our local economies have grown around the sector. Traditionally, our local supermarkets, pubs, cafés and businesses were established initially to provide services and products for local people. Many people have been employed in creameries, co-ops and State agencies or as farm labourers and farmers. Those of us who live and have grown up in rural Ireland know well the importance of agriculture. They do not know that, perhaps, here in the centre of Dublin. While rural economies have grown and diversified, we know the vital role agriculture has in our local economies. We have much pride in our local produce and support for Irish farmers can be found across our communities.

I have serious concerns about this deal, as do the people of north Cork, whom I represent. The farming sector, which contributes hugely to the local economy of north Cork, does too. We need the Irish Government to stand up for standards in food production, environmental protection and workers' rights and ensure family farms are kept in all trade deals at European level.

To touch on some of the points the Minister made, the EU has made funds available for hardship or losses endured as a result of the Mercosur deal, but it is unclear how difficult it will be to trigger these funds. The Department said the Irish Government should be able to obtain these moneys for farmers who lose out, but speaking before the committee on agriculture, a Department of agriculture official said there would be a high threshold for accessing EU support. They are taking farmers for granted. They are trying a small bit to make them into fools.

What crazes me – I will touch on it very briefly – is an example under the Mercosur deal where EU policy seems inconsistent. Certain pesticides are banned for use in the EU, although EU companies can still manufacture and sell products containing them elsewhere, including to Mercosur countries. Farmers in Mercosur countries could then sell these products, which use these pesticides that are deemed unsafe for the environment and human health, back to Europe. A trade deal with Mercosur would incentivise the expansion of this market.

I absolutely welcome this motion and I am calling out Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for their complete disregard for farmers and rural communities across this country.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** The EU-Mercosur trade agreement is not just another obscure policy; it is a crossroads. On the one hand, there is an opportunity for some sectors. On the other hand, there is the potential for real and lasting harm to the communities that have sustained this country for generations. We simply must tread carefully because the stakes could not be higher for counties such as my own, Wexford. This agreement would open the door to 99,000 tonnes of South American beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry entering the EU at reduced tariffs. For Ireland, a nation where beef farming is more than an industry but a heritage, this is seismic. Our beef exports are worth almost €3 billion annually. Even a small drop in price could be existential for family farms that have been passed down from generation to generation for centuries. They are not just numbers or statistics but, rather, they are livelihoods, traditions and, in the potentially affected communities, the heart of rural Ireland.

First, as a quality, food-producing country, we know only too well that standards matter. Irish farmers uphold some of the highest environmental and animal welfare standards in the world. Mercosur countries, by contrast, have weaker enforcement and troubling records on deforestation and pesticide use. If we allow imports produced under lower standards, we undermine our farmers and betray our climate commitments.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** We have to ask this question: how can we preach sustainability at home while rewarding destruction abroad? The safeguards are flimsy. Promises of review mechanisms and compensation funds sound reassuring but they often arrive too late after farms have become unsustainable and families, trying to survive and diversify, have left the land. Farmers fear, rightly so, that by the time Brussels acts, the damage will be irreversible. Do we want to be the ones to explain to the next generation why we stood by and watched rural Ireland collapse? The economic argument is uneven. Yes, the EU may gain billions of euro in industrial exports, but Ireland's rural economy will bear the brunt of the cost. Is it fair to sacrifice the backbone of our country for marginal gains elsewhere?

We have also heard the voices of the farming community, many of whom are here today. Declan Hanrahan, chair of the IFA livestock committee, warns that the Mercosur trade deal, as it stands, will destroy Irish and European beef farming and that there are no effective safeguards for farmers, markets or the environment. Seán McNamara of the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association stated that it is "a disaster for Irish suckler and beef farmers" and that if it goes ahead, "it will devastate rural communities across Ireland". The IFA president, Francie Gorman, reminds us:

Either standards count for something, or they don't.

[...]

It's both hypocritical ... to insist on the highest standards for European producers to allow Mercosur countries access without reaching the same standards.

These are not abstract warnings. Rather, they are the informed opinions from the fields and farmyards of Ireland.

I am aware that the Government has rightly raised concerns about climate, biodiversity and farm incomes, but words are not enough. We must lead the charge for enforceable standards, rapid safeguards and a fair deal that does not sacrifice rural Ireland on the altar of global trade. It is essential that we, as a nation, stand firm and demand binding commitments on animal welfare, pesticide use and deforestation; push for safeguard mechanisms that protect farmers before - not after - the damage is done; work with like-minded EU states to defend agriculture and sustainability; and tell the public what is at stake here, namely, jobs, communities and the integrity of our food system.

If the Minister were here, he would know this is a moment of truth. The Mercosur deal is more than a trade agreement; it is a test of all our values. Will we stand with the families who fed this nation for generations? Will we defend the green fields that define us? Will we stand firmly with our commitments to the planet and to battle climate change? Will we seek to ensure

that the rights of workers, hard fought for in Europe, are enjoyed by the workers of Mercosur, or will we turn our backs on all of this for short-term gains? Ireland simply must stand firm. We must fight for fairness, sustainability and the future of rural Ireland. Let us not be the generation of politicians who sold out our farming community, turned our backs on global workers' rights and supported a two-tier climate change agenda. Let us be the generation that stood up and said Ireland will not trade away its soul or dilute its position on issues that have a negative impact on the rights of workers, the planet, on climate change and on farm incomes right across this island.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I welcome this motion and the opportunity to speak on this really important issue. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing it forward. The Social Democrats will be 100% supportive of this motion. Objection to the Mercosur free trade agreement is not just a matter of trade but of principle, sovereignty, environmental integrity and protecting our indigenous industries. This deal is a direct threat to our beef and poultry sectors, to our rural communities and to the standards we have fought so hard to uphold in food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection.

I begin by expressing a deep concern I am sure others in this Chamber share. I am sure many people in the Gallery do so too. The Government is not fighting this deal with the urgency or strength it demands. I have often wondered what kind of conversations would have happened in this Chamber when we were talking about the Common Fisheries Policy. What kind of discussions, debates and arguments were put forward when Ireland was signing away our sovereignty when it came to our fishing resources? I must say that reading this speech from the Minister today, I would imagine it was very similar. The Minister has seven pages here in this speech about Mercosur and, my goodness, there is vague and watery language. There is talk of "repeatedly emphasising", "the text did not go far enough", "the Government has concerns", and "examining the final package". Nowhere in this speech does he say this Government is opposed to Mercosur. Nowhere in this speech has he stated that Ireland will formally or has formally opposed this deal. That is exactly what we needed to hear from the Minister tonight. It is what people in the Gallery needed to hear. Instead, it is wishy-washy language.

In May this year, I raised this issue with the Tánaiste. I asked specifically what countries he was talking with to ensure we can have a minority blocking group on this matter. I asked him who he was working with. Similarly, I got fluffy language back but nothing definite. I was told we were having meetings. Where are the results of those meetings? Why is the Minister not able to say we are absolutely 100% against this deal and we will fight hard for our rural communities when it comes to it? Turning to Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and, indeed, the Independents, who have been lambasting me recently-----

**Deputy George Lawlor:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** -----in relation to ensuring we have a robust farming sector that works with our environmental sector, where are they tonight?

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I am here.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I am not specifically talking about the Minister of State. I am talking about the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. Where is he tonight? He is not here for this debate. Where is his support for rural communities when it comes to Mercosur? Is he just going to roll over and accept it because Europe says so?

In relation to this deal, the numbers speak for themselves. The Mercosur trade deal will allow 99,000 tonnes of beef into the EU annually at a reduced tariff rate of 7.5%. These will not just be low-value cuts. They will be premium steaks and striploin fillets, the very products Irish farmers rely on to fetch to fair prices in European markets. Ireland exports roughly 440,000 tonnes of beef every year, which is worth €2.8 billion. Meat Industry Ireland, MII, estimates that Mercosur could cost our beef industry between €100 million and €130 million annually. This represents a loss of between €75 and €95 per head of cattle. Suckler farmers are already operating on razor-thin margins and will now be pushed to the brink. Family farms will be lost and rural Ireland will suffer. No amount of plámasing from the Healy-Raes or the Ministers will make up for that loss.

I also want to mention that it is very important Sinn Féin has included poultry in this motion because sometimes I think we do not have the debate in relation to poultry and the impact Mercosur will have on poultry producers. They are often sidelined in this debate. They will, however, face immediate and severe exposure under Mercosur. The deal allows 180,000 tonnes of poultry into the EU under a five-year transition period. In one year alone, 30,000 tonnes will enter. This is equivalent to the entire annual Irish chicken breast meat production of 1.2 billion fillets. To put it plainly, a single year of Mercosur imports could wipe out the domestic market for a cornerstone product of our poultry sector. Brazilian poultry is sold at less than half the price of its EU equivalent. That price differential reflects very different input costs, regulatory standards and production practices. In essence, that price differential reflects a significantly lower-quality product. Irish producers cannot compete on price with imports produced under such conditions nor should they have to. The EU already imports 400,000 tonnes of poultry meat annually. Adding Mercosur volumes risks flooding the market with cheap imports and will devastate local producers and seriously undermine our food sovereignty, something becoming more and more important in an increasingly unstable world.

This deal is not just bad for our farmers, however. I will always speak up for the environment when it needs someone in here to speak for it. This deal is bad for the environment and our planet. Mercosur countries, especially Brazil, have been the focus of intense international concern over deforestation, land conversion and weak enforcement of environmental laws. Large areas of the Amazon rain forest have been cleared at alarming rates to make way for cattle ranching and soya production, releasing vast stores of carbon and destroying biodiversity. It is hard to miss the bitter irony of COP 30 being hosted in the heart of the rain forest as it disappears before our very eyes.

The optics are bleak but the reality is much worse. While global leaders meet to discuss climate action, the ecosystems those negotiations rely on are being actively degraded around them. Approving a trade deal that increases market access for commodities linked to that degradation risks locking in supply chains that perpetuate high emissions and environmental harm. Irish farmers are being asked to meet ever stricter sustainability standards, adopt

climate-smart practices and absorb the cost of decarbonisation. Meanwhile, imports produced with lower environmental safeguards-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am here. Deputy Whitmore was looking for me.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Healy-Rae, take a seat.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** You were looking for me. Here I am.

*(Interruptions)*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Healy-Rae-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am here. I was here all night.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Is the Leas-Cheann Comhairle allowing that to happen?

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I will not be protecting the foxes either.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Are you allowing him to come in here and interrupt this debate?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Healy-Rae-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I will not be protecting the foxes either like you will.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Healy-Rae, take your seat.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Stay in your seat and stay quiet.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I will do whatever I like, madam.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Stay in your seat and stay quiet; it is not your time to talk.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I will-----

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy George Lawlor:** Danny, sit down.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Leas-Cheann Comhairle-----

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** -----this is unacceptable.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Healy-Rae.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** He is completely interrupting this debate. He does not know when it is his turn to speak, and it is not his turn to speak now.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Tell them what you said about the foxes.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Sit down and be quiet.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Save the foxes.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** Sit down, will you.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** Sit down.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Sit down and be quiet.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I will sit down wherever I like.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Sit down and be quiet.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You will sit down Deputy or you will leave the Chamber. It is one or the other.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am going out anyway.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Good. Out.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** She was looking for me, so I had to come in.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Go. Please leave the Chamber.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I never mentioned your name at all.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** You did mention my name.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** It is your brother sitting on the ministerial benches that I mentioned.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** You will not say I was not here either-----

**Deputy George Lawlor:** Good night.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am here and I have been all day and all night.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** You have not been. You have just walked back in.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** You will not-----

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** You have just walked back.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Go ahead, Deputy.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** You have not been here all the time. Would you stop?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Whitmore, continue please.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Okay, if we are let get back to it.

Meanwhile imports produced with lower environmental safeguards effectively undercut these efforts. That is not fair competition; that is regulatory hypocrisy. Embedding references to the Paris Agreement into the text might provide political signalling but without binding enforceable environmental conditionality, it will not close the gap. If we are serious about protecting farmers, defending environmental standards and asserting food sovereignty, we must insist on treaty language that goes beyond rhetoric. This means concrete, enforceable obligations, automatic remedies for demonstrated competitive distortions and a transparent independent monitoring regime with teeth. Anything else will leave Irish producers paying the price of diplomacy dressed up as progress.

There is then the issue of health. The quality of meat produced under Mercosur standards raised serious concerns. Brazil's beef farmers are known to use pesticides banned in the EU and reports have highlighted carcinogenic residues, antibiotic overuse, with poor traceability. Indeed, the use of hormones, such as estradiol, are used in some Mercosur production systems. This is a hormone that is banned in the EU due to cancer risks. How can we stand by our children consuming that? Overuse of antibiotics in intensive production contributes to antimicrobial resistance, weaker pesticide control and increases the risk of carcinogenic residues. In 2017, the EU banned Brazilian meat for a period because of these systemic failures.

9 o'clock

Has that been completely forgotten by this Government? We are so lucky in Ireland to have a high level of trust in our food system. Ratifying Mercosur would erode that trust and put our consumers at risk.

This deal is not inevitable and the Government can stand against it. This motion stands up for Irish farmers, food safety and environmental integrity. I strongly urge the Government to

support this motion and to formally object to the Mercosur free trade deal. When I say "formally object", I mean formally object. I do not mean the Government should go to the newspapers and talk about how it does not think it should go through. I do not mean standing up here in the Dáil and pretending or using rhetoric to suggest it is objecting to it. I mean it should actually go to the table and say this Government will not support it. That is what is necessary. There should be no more talk in the papers, no more press releases, no more fluffy language or pretending the Government is going to do something, treating farmers like they have not a notion what it is doing. They know exactly what the Government is doing. They know they are not being represented by it. They know they are not being represented by the Independents on those benches and by that kind of behaviour we have seen here tonight.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** Not true.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** That is not what people want to see. That is not who they want to see representing them in the manner they are being represented.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** They want the Government to stand with them and to oppose this deal. They will not forgive the Government if it does not do that. They will never forgive it if it lets them down at this stage.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** I am pleased to speak in this debate today on behalf of the Green Party. I thank Sinn Féin for putting forward the motion. The Mercosur agreement and the trade deal that it increasingly looks like this Government is going to support is not just environmentally catastrophic. It will be economically devastating for Irish agriculture. It will open the floodgates to cheap beef from industrial-scale operations across South America, where production costs are minimal. That is due to weak labour law protections, environmental laws that are minimal and a sector that is pumped up with toxic agrochemicals, many of which are actually banned in the European Union. How can Irish family farms compete with beef that is fattened on land that has been ripped from the Amazon and sprayed with substances that would land an Irish farmer in court if he or she used those same substances?

One element of the Mercosur deal that is not being recognised in the Irish context is the chemical warfare embedded in the agreement. While South American agriculture will flow to Europe, that will mean there is a trade imbalance, and that will be evened out by billions' worth of pesticides going the other direction. Many of these are so toxic that the EU has actually banned them: carcinogens that cause cancer; endocrine disruptors that block the body's normal functioning of our hormones; neonic synthetic pesticides that are toxic to pollinators; and chemicals that contaminate the soil and water for generations. In Brazil alone, approvals for highly contaminating and hazardous pesticides have surged in recent years, as have their sales.

Meanwhile, the environmental carnage accelerates. The Mercosur deal rewards more cattle ranching, more soy plantations and more deforestation of the Amazon. Indeed, this deal represents a deforestation machine. It will drive climate collapse while farmers in other parts of the world are working constructively to reduce their own emissions as they are here in Ireland and across the European Union.

Finally, there is the human cost. Indigenous communities are being displaced, poisoned, persecuted and even killed to clear lands for the exports that this deal is designed to boost. This is not modern; it is medieval and is rooted in extraction, exploitation and a fantasy that Europe can outsource environmental damage without moral consequence. I urge Government Members to reject this deal here in Ireland and at European level and to negotiate with their EU counterparts to stop this disastrous deal in its tracks. The EU's integrity demands it, Irish farming families demand it and our climate obligations demand it too.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I welcome this Private Members' motion brought forward by Sinn Féin and confirm my support for it. The Mercosur deal threatens the future of Irish agriculture and family farms and harms rural communities. The European Commission concluded negotiations with the four Mercosur countries, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, in December 2024. The deal was to be subject to approval by national parliaments and unanimity at EU level but in a political stroke, the deal was split into two separate parts, meaning that national parliaments will now have no say in the ratification of the agreement and only a qualified majority will be needed at EU level. The importation of 99,000 tonnes of beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry into the EU will have serious detrimental effects on Irish agriculture and these figures are surely only the thin end of the wedge. This is also at odds with EU and domestic climate legislation.

To aid the ratification of the deal, the EU has also delayed the implementation of the deforestation Regulation 2023/1115. Imported agricultural products from Mercosur countries are also often produced using chemicals that have been banned in the EU. An EU audit of 2024 showed that Brazil, for example, cannot reliably trace or guarantee hormone-free beef, yet the agreement will allow exporters to self-certify compliance with EU regulations. Of course, we in this country know where self-certification and light-touch regulations have got us - buildings and apartments non-compliant with fire regulations and the scandal of defective concrete.

The bilateral safeguard proposed by the EU only applies for a transitional period of 12 years and the weakness of the system, when it comes to protecting Irish farmers, is very clear. The triggering mechanism for the bilateral safeguard does not apply to situations of risk to public health, environmental destruction or indigenous dispossession. The Mercosur trade agreement would also undermine our food security objectives and threaten generational renewal. The deal, in my view, trades off the future of Irish agriculture and rural communities for the benefit of the export of cars, machinery, chemicals and steel to the Mercosur countries by big European economies. This is further confirmation and indication of the erosion of Irish sovereignty.

The Irish Farmers Association says it cannot countenance a deal that refuses to recognise the gap in standards between the EU and Brazil and is concerned about lower standards of traceability of Brazilian beef production and the use of hormones. In a recent concession to attempt to offset these concerns, the Commission has proposed a mechanism whereby preferential Mercosur access for farm produce could be suspended if the imported market share or volume rose by 10% or prices fell by a similar figure. Mr. Francie Gorman, the IFA president, has said:

Regrettably it is very difficult to see how this so-called safeguard will be of any help. It requires there to be a threat of 'serious injury' to the sector before an investigation is even launched.

He also said this is "a very high bar" and went on to say:

This safeguard clause allows for the gradual destruction of the EU beef and poultry markets as this deal is phased in. It is just a political fig leaf.

The MEP Luke 'Ming' Flanagan draws attention to another difficulty. He says trust in European institutions and in their ability to manage trade partnerships has been damaged by the war in Gaza. He points out that any proposed safeguards to suspend trade, if it results in a negative impact on certain sectors, cannot be taken seriously when the EU has not done likewise despite a genocide going on. He is referring, of course, to the Israeli war in Gaza. I want the Minister to confirm that he and this Government are opposed to this deal and will fight it tooth and nail. We have not heard this yet.

I have heard lately that it would appear the Minister for agriculture links the nitrates derogation currently available to Irish farmers with the Mercosur deal. That is a very dangerous road to go down and I warn him not to go in that direction.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the farming organisations. I welcome this motion. In the summer of 2024, when the political machines were flying around this country, the promises to all of the farming organisations, farmers and voters that Mercosur would be opposed were plenty. In November, it was said again. I was looking at the programme for Government again this evening. It stated that the Government would "work with like-minded EU countries to stand up for Irish farmers and defend our interests in opposing the current Mercosur trade deal." What I have heard tonight is like a fella sitting on the fence and a fella who is going to fall into Ursula von der Leyen's side of the field, not into the side of farmers right around the country. It was astonishing to hear a Minister for agriculture basically say we will look at this, that and the other. Do not give a promise a year ago that the Government will do something if it is not going to deliver it. Do not fool the people around this country and in the agricultural sector if it will not deliver what it said it would.

Tonight, Deputy Martin Kenny and all of the representatives in agriculture had a meeting with the Polish committee on agriculture. They are fully opposed to Mercosur. They will work with us. In the committee, we are trying to build relationships. We are going to talk to the French, the Austrians and the Italians. This work on the Mercosur deal should have been done by our Minister already to build relationships everywhere. The Polish are completely opposed to it, so we have allies if we want to use them, or do we have the towel thrown in, with the secret deal done behind the scenes?

In the last couple of weeks, we heard the Commissioner talk. The Commissioner was in Ireland and stated very clearly, in committee room two, that if cattle or beef prices dropped 6%, 7%, 8% or 9% per year, the handbrake would not come on. During the week you would not know if it is the cable that is gone in the handbrake with the way it is now. They will not give a yes-no answer because they are muddying the water and leaving farmers not knowing what the terms and conditions are. The fact is that if prices do not drop by more than 10%, farmers are in trouble. That has not changed.

This is a grubby deal for the simple reason that it has been split in Europe so that there will be no vote in this Parliament here. We can blame someone else and say they did that abroad in Europe. I welcome Ciaran Mullooly and the rest of the MEPs such as Michael McNamara,

who have gone to the courts to try to do something. I am not a believer in the European Court of Justice, ECJ, because I think it is a kangaroo court and I do not think we will get what we deserve out of that.

Our MEPs need to build relationships, our Government needs to build relationships and we on the agriculture committee will build relationships that are as good as possible. However, at the end of the day, this will be sorted in the Council of Ministers. If the Government has the *liarthróidí*, do not be afraid to be on the other side of the fence. Do not be afraid to say you do not agree with what the EU is doing and you are opposing it, and let others stand up with you. The simple reason is that there will be 7 million more cattle from now to 2033 in Brazil. As has been brought up - I welcome this point as well - the poultry sector in Ireland will be decimated by this deal. There is also the issue of traceability and hormones.

We all know what is going on. They built a road through the rainforest for COP30 and these are the people who will be saving the world. The Minister and the Government have to make a decision. Last year, they assured the Irish people, not alone during the summer but before the election as well. Plenty of politicians who are elected here met the farming organisations right around their constituencies and guaranteed them that there was no way they would let this deal through. Sadly, tonight I am a bit hoarser than I was a year ago. Some of us have stood by this. This Government needs to stand up for the Irish farming sector and be counted. If it does not do that, it will not be tomorrow or next year or the year after that we will see the results. It will be in nine and ten years' time that the farmers of Ireland will suffer for this.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I welcome the farming organisations who are represented in the Gallery today. It is the third time they have been here in the Dáil during the past week fighting for the survival of their members. I thank Sinn Féin for this motion on the Mercosur trade agreement, an issue that goes to the heart of Ireland's rural economy, our food standards and our environmental commitments. This deal as it stands poses a serious threat to Irish farming. It would open the door to 99,000 tonnes of South American beef entering the EU market every year, produced under conditions that fall far short of the standard we demand here. Growth hormones that are banned in Europe are still widely used in Brazil. There is no EU inspection system on the ground and past experience shows that meat cleared by Brazilian authorities has failed EU safety tests. Irish farmers have built a reputation for quality, traceability and sustainability. That reputation is not just a market slogan; it is a foundation of rural livelihoods. Yet, this deal risks flooding the market with beef at €3.50 per kilo compared with €9 or €10 for quality Irish beef. How can our farmers compete with that?

It is not just beef. Dairy exports, which some claim will benefit, will face the same reality. Mercosur dairy products are up to 40% cheaper than ours. The promised opportunities are, frankly, wishful thinking. We are told there will be safeguards but let us look at the facts. The proposed €1 billion safety net for farmers has been dropped. The environmental and human rights clauses sound good on paper but enforcement has been weak in other trade deals. These are not real protections; they are political cover.

This is why voices like Ciaran Mullooly, our Midlands-North-West MEP, have been campaigning tirelessly in Brussels to block this agreement. He has warned that this is not just an economic issue; it is a question of food safety, climate responsibility and fairness. Ciaran has built alliances with farming groups and secured commitments from France to oppose the

deal. Ireland must do the same. The Government promised to oppose Mercosur. Tonight, we need to reaffirm that commitment. I am worried when I do not see agriculture Ministers across from us here showing the interest they should. We need our Government to stand up and make sure this will not stand. This Government needs to back Irish farmers, the people who put food on the table. Ireland must make its position crystal clear. This deal is unacceptable. Silence is not an option. This is a defining moment. Do we stand with our farmers, our rural communities and our environmental obligations or do we sign away those values for a deal that benefits others at our expense?

In rural Ireland, agriculture is not just an industry; it is a way of life. Up here in Dublin, some may not fully grasp that reality. We know the hard work it takes to run a farm. We know the dedication it takes to keep that farm alive. We know what it means when fathers and mothers dream of passing that land onto their children. Farming is not a job; it is in the blood, but our farmers are exhausted. They are buried under paperwork, strangled by bureaucracy and squeezed by regulations on nitrates. Now, if this Mercosur deal goes ahead, it will be the wipe-out of Irish farming. I urge the House to reject this agreement and to send a strong message to Brussels: Ireland will not sacrifice its standards, its farmers or its future

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I welcome the farming organisations this evening and thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. Last week, the Climate Change Advisory Council of Ireland outlined that if we continue on our current trajectory around carbon emissions, this country will face up to €26 billion of fines by 2030. It is an incredible sum of money - €26 billion. At the same time that our European institutions, and indeed our Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments, have signed us up to these fines, they are also about to sign us up to the Mercosur trade deal, which will see 99,000 tonnes of beef from Europe, deforestation across Latin America and the importation of substandard beef at a carbon cost of three to six times that of Irish beef.

How does that make sense? How does it make sense that we will pay up to €26 billion in fines by 2030? On the other hand, we are going to sign this trade deal, which will have a devastating impact for our climate. Who is this going to benefit? We have some of the best beef in the world, with some of the strictest and toughest environmental standards, and standards right across our food sector. The beef that we are going to import is a verifiable health risk, with 17-beta-estradiol, a growth hormone that is widely found and widely used in cattle production in the Mercosur countries. It is classified as a carcinogenic. The use of hormones is completely banned across Europe. It is completely banned in Ireland, yet we want to import this into Ireland and right across the European Union. We have seen these double standards not just in this beef deal but also in the tillage sector, which knows all too well about this. The fact is that genetically modified grain is coming into Ireland and the European Union and is competing with Irish native grain, and yet we cannot engage in that. How does that make sense?

I sat in the committee this evening and we spoke to our Polish counterparts. We are working to try and build alliance across the European Union, but that is what the Government should be doing here. It is what the Minister for agriculture should be doing. I think we do have support in that regard. We saw the electioneering that went on at the ploughing championships and at agricultural shows across the country before the general election. All of those commitments seem to be forgotten. The language this evening was incredibly vague. That is absolutely and

totally disappointing. In terms of the safeguards, I think it is well documented now that there are no safeguards and that the beef price can actually fall by 9% over five years without any safeguards being implemented. It will cost the farming sector across Ireland up to €130 million. It is time for the Government to get off the fence and either come down with the farmers or come down on the side of Mercosur. It is time-----

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

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** I welcome all the farmers' organisations in the Gallery here this evening. The Mercosur trade agreement is moving very quickly towards a qualified majority vote. That means Ireland cannot rely on an imagined veto. We need clarity, conviction and a firm defence of Irish farmers. Fianna Fáil welcomes this debate but let me be very clear: unless this agreement contains real enforcement protections, Ireland cannot and should not support the Mercosur package. Barry Cowen MEP has done detailed and difficult work on this. He met privately with the DG AGRI officials, who design and enforce the safeguard mechanism. What he brought back matters deeply to the farmers across Louth and the north east and all across the country. The Commission has now confirmed that the 10% threshold is not a hard trigger, that the 7% to 9% rise in imports or fall in prices already counts as a market injury, that provisional safeguards can be imposed in 21 days, that a member state's requests must be answered within five working days and that investigations must conclude within four months, not 12.

These improvements are direct results of Irish pressure, but they do not change the basic reality that 99,000 tonnes of beef quota has real consequences for real farms. In Collon, Ardee, Dunleer, the Cooley Peninsula, Castlebellingham and all across the Boyne Valley, farmers are operating on razor-thin margins and cannot absorb the price collapse driven by lower standard imports. That leads to a central issue of trust. If farmers cannot trust their own Department, they are not going to trust Brussels. The recent handling of the sheep welfare scheme proves that point. Farmers were told they would receive €13 per ewe. They planned around it and they budgeted for it. Then the Department cut it to €11.50. This is not a minor tweak. It is a disgrace. When the State moves the goalposts after farmers have already committed, how can any anyone realistically expect them to have confidence in a European safeguard system affecting their livelihoods? If this is how the Department operates a domestic scheme, why should farmers trust them-----

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** Ah come on. It is not the Department, it is the Government.

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** -----in something as consequential-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** It is the Government, not the Department.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** Who runs the Department?

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** I do not. I am speaking. I do not run a Department. Am I a Minister?

*Interruptions.*

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** Do not interrupt me. If you agree with me, shut your mouth. Do you agree with me?

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** Who runs the Government?

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** Do you agree with me?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Hold on, Deputy.

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** Do you agree with me?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Hold on. Deputy Lawless, you were not interrupted when you were speaking. I would ask you to have respect for whoever is speaking on this side, please.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** You were not so quick to defend Deputy Whitmore when she was interrupted-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You can make your point through your side's speakers-----

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** You cannot be biased on-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You were not interrupted. Deputy McGreehan to conclude.

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** If this is how the Department operates on a domestic scheme, why would farmers trust them with something as consequential as Mercosur? Fianna Fáil's position is straightforward. We support trade but not at the expense of Irish agriculture. We recognise the export opportunities in services, engineering and life sciences but not at the cost of the farmers in the north east or anywhere else. The programme for Government is explicit: Ireland will stand by like-minded EU countries to defend our farmers and oppose any Mercosur agreement that does not deliver binding commitments on climate, biodiversity, deforestation and fair product standards. That remains our position. Farmers want honesty, consistency and a Government that keeps its word. Fianna Fáil will continue to fight for exactly that because rural Ireland cannot be asked to carry the risk of trade while trust at home has already been undermined.

**Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere:** I welcome every farming organisation here this evening. I am delighted to get the opportunity to speak on an issue that lies at the heart of our rural communities, the Mercosur trade agreement, and how we are going to ensure the protection of Irish farmers. As everybody in this room knows, farming is not just a job; it is a way of life for many in Ireland. Our farmers work tirelessly to produce high-quality food while adhering to the highest environmental and animal welfare standards. However, the proposed Mercosur

deal raises significant concerns about how it could impact their livelihoods. While we recognise the potential economic opportunities that could arise from opening new markets, we have to be clear that our farmers cannot bear the weight of this agreement if it puts their livelihoods at risk. This is a non-negotiable. The prospect of increased imports of cheaper agricultural products from South America could drive down prices and threaten the sustainability of our farms. We have to advocate, in particular at LEADER level at this stage, for strong safeguards, higher standards, compensation and support, and transparency and consultation.

It is a very specific measure in the programme for Government that Ireland will stand by like-minded EU countries to defend our farmers and to oppose any Mercosur agreement that does not deliver binding commitments on climate, biodiversity, deforestation and fair production standards.

In conclusion, I call on the Government to stand up for Irish farmers, to stand up for our farmers right around the country, to stand up for our farmers in Carlow and Kilkenny, because they deserve our protection and support. As we navigate the complexities of international trade, let us ensure that any agreements made serve to strengthen, not weaken, our agricultural sector.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Whatever way you slice it, this Mercosur madness is a disastrous deal for Ireland and I remain strongly opposed to it. If it is pushed through and ratified by a qualified majority, then the EU Commission will have very clearly signalled its contempt not just for the sovereignty of this Parliament but for the livelihoods of the farmers that it will destroy. Far from being our ally and our friend, this Commission has demonstrated a willingness to smother our rural economy in its sleep. It simply does not care what the outcomes are for Ireland. It is, quite literally, a poisonous deal as we know that South American meat often uses growth-promoting hormones and antibiotics that are banned in the EU, potentially increasing carcinogenic risks for Irish consumers. The arguments against this deal have been rehearsed so many times. In fact, the deal has managed to unite farmers and environmentalists in their opposition to it, but for very different reasons. There is no doubt whatsoever that Ireland stands to lose out disproportionately due to our reliance on high-value, standards compliance farming. The critical issues have not been mitigated despite our clear warnings to the EU Commission. Some of the those warnings include the deal allowing for 99,000 tonnes of tariff-free beef primarily from Brazil and Argentina, not just as a once-off but annually, undercutting Irish farmers' prices amid current high market values and threatening our sector viability. What we need here is a commitment from the Government. The Government must stand with our farming community. This deal must be opposed and a message of strong opposition has to be sent to the EU Commission now. The Government needs to get off the fence and stand with our farmers.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am glad to be able to speak on this tonight. I welcome all the farming organisations and members who are here tonight, especially Mr. Kevin Casey, our Macra manager in Cahir and indeed now in Dungarvan, and his Macra farmers. The future of farming is at stake here. We had all the promises and everything else but it is like shifting sands now. We do not know where we are.

I come from the Golden Vale, from a very mixed farm with tillage, cattle, sheep and potatoes - you name it. The Government has not shown good faith to the farmers with the way it has

treated the sheep scheme and the cattle scheme. Successive Governments have not shown good faith to farmers for a long time. When we had the Commissioner here last week, she went to a meeting alongside the Minister for agriculture and the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae. I was astonished to think we had a Judas in the camp. When it came to the Social Democrats, they went totally against the cause we have here. *Ní neart go cur le chéile* is a good speech from me. Stand together united. Then, lo and behold, who had a seat at the table? It was An Taisce. When the Minister brought the Commissioner to that table and the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, was there as well, what happened? The brave boyos from An Taisce insisted that the Minister and Minister of State leave the table and they had their own conversation with the Commissioner. We would not have to guess or to be a genius to find out what they said and what they told her. We have an NGO here, overpaid fat cats, who are destroying rural Ireland. They are destroying families trying to get planning permission. They are anti-farmer. We saw what happened in the court case in Kilkenny in the constituency of Deputy Cleere and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle with the Glanbia plant. It took it to the High Court with taxpayers' money. We have to get our house in order. Cut out the NGOs. Cut out those traitors who are destroying our country here and not supporting us, and then have a Government and all parties and none standing up for the farmers.

We have been talking about the fishing industry but it is too late. It will be gone. We are at D-day now and we have huge problems. We need to stand together. We do not have to have those NGOs at meetings like that last week. An Taisce - I will name it here again - would not allow the Minister or Minister of State hear what it was saying because it was talking us down. It was damaging farmers and trying to blame farmers for the pollution that was happening by Uisce Éireann, county councils and industry. We had pollution in Cork and nobody was responsible. If it was a farmer, it would be all over the papers and everything else. It is time that we were fair here to rural Ireland, to young farmers and old farmers alike. Stand with the farmers. Get rid of An Taisce and all of the other bodies that are melting us here, soaking us and destroying us in Europe and elsewhere.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to talk here tonight on behalf of the motion. I welcome all of the farmers here from around the country. I see people here who were at an IFA meeting in Kilgarvan last night, would you believe? They are up here and they are very welcome.

All I have is my word and this Government promised me, going back to the start of the year, that it would be against Mercosur. This was one of the four things that I asked. All I have is my word and that is what it said to me, that it was against Mercosur. I would like the Minister to have been stronger here tonight when he was talking about it. I am only hoping, and I am depending on the Government to reject it because it is not fair. We are all under the one sky. They are doing what they are doing down in South America and if they can export beef in here against Irish farmers, that is not right and I will not stand for it any day of the week.

I am a farmer and have been for the past 40 or 50 years. My three sons are farming. I am still farming myself. I depend on farmers. A big part of the vote I got in County Kerry was from the farming organisations along with a lot of others. I really depend on the farmers. I look up to them. I know what they go through in the middle of the night when they are trying to calve a cow. I know what is involved day to day. When you beat everything else, you still

have to contend with the weather. I know what each and every one of them goes through because I went through it myself, as did my father and all belonging to me.

We are depending on this Government and the Minister and Ministers of State for agriculture to get out there and make bloody sure that we are not accepting Mercosur. I know what it means. I know what it will mean to the farmers. As well, there is a problem with our poultry at the present time. Someone can export turkey or chicken in here. That is not fair. That is not what we were told at the very beginning.

I am very disappointed with the MEPs we elected in Europe. They have not been standing up to the European Parliament in this fight about Mercosur.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Aird.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Many of them have let us down. Rest assured, my heart is with each and every one of the farmers. I know what they are going through day and night and I will continue the fight against Mercosur.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I will take no dictation from Deputy Daly or Jennifer Whitmore calling me out because I was here at the start and I will be here at the finish.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** You are preventing Deputy Aird from speaking.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** It is a pity your brother is not here.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** What did you say? I am supporting the farmers against the Mercosur deal and I will stand firm on that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** And the farmers fully understand that. I call Deputy Aird.

**Deputy William Aird:** I am glad to have an opportunity to say a few words this evening. I completely stand behind the farmers on this one and I am delighted there are so many of them here in the Public Gallery this evening, and rightly so. They are absolutely worn out between being in Newbridge or Naas a while ago and they are here again this evening.

This Mercosur thing is a very bad deal for this country. I am sorry that I am here on my own from Fine Gael but that is neither here nor there. I thank everybody who organised the motion and I have no problem with that either. It is timely and it is very important. We have to push back.

This is the first year for the past 25 or 30 years that I have seen farmers getting a return for beef cattle. We have lost over 200,000 suckler farmers. They are gone because farmers were not making money. That has given us the perilous situation we are in at the moment. Good and very good stock people were forced into dairying in this country and we are going to see worse than that. How can anybody, when we are net contributors to the EU, see what is

happening out there and allow this beef to come in? Then we are told that if it suffers more than 10%, we will get a refund. Farmers do not want a refund. They want to get paid for the job that they do. None of them wants to get money in the post. We want to be allowed to produce beef, get a market value for it and just make a week's wages. That is all we want. Unless people like every one of us in the Dáil Chamber oppose this Mercosur deal, we are going to see farmers being wiped out of the beef industry. We will have nothing left in the country. The tillage farmers are on their knees at the moment. I beg the Government to give them money. Now, we will see the beef industry going and there will be nothing left only the dairy industry, and that is not good practice for farming.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** You are in the Government.

**Deputy William Aird:** I have no problem with that. I know more about farming than you do, I can tell you that. What do you know about farming?

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I know about farming. There you go. You did not know that, did you?

**Deputy William Aird:** You have a pair of wellingtons that never got dirty. I can tell you that.

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin):** I acknowledge the Deputies who tabled the motion and the genuine debate we have had here this evening. The Government recognises the real depth of concern surrounding the proposed EU Mercosur agreement. In particular, those concerns relate to Irish agriculture and our rural economy as well as the importance of ensuring sustainable adequate environmental protections. For these reasons, and in acknowledgement of the very important points that have been raised here this evening, the Government does not oppose the motion and I fully support that.

Personally, I am very familiar with the various iterations of EU Mercosur agreements, having spent 15 years in the European Parliament, and I opposed the various proposals put forward over many years on a number of grounds. These ranged from the potentially negative effects on the Irish beef trade to the destruction of part of the Amazon forest as well as, of course, crucially highlighting different production standards alongside the issue of compliance with sanitary and phytosanitary requirements. This is why my Independent colleagues and I, when we signed up to the programme for Government, insisted that the Government oppose the current deal. In this regard, I want to quote exactly what the programme for Government states. It states the Government commits to "Work with like-minded EU countries to stand up for Irish farmers and defend our interests in opposing the current Mercosur trade deal." Those listening to the contribution of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, at the beginning of the debate will have heard him say the Departments of foreign affairs and agriculture were continuing to examine the proposals in detail and would continue to engage with the European Commission to ensure Ireland's concerns were fully taken on board. However, he goes on to say that, pending that examination and the completion of the ongoing engagement, Ireland's position on the EU Mercosur agreement remains as clearly outlined in the programme for Government, which is,

I reiterate, to work "with like-minded countries to stand up for Irish farmers and defend our interests in opposing the current Mercosur deal." I fully support this position and recognise and applaud the efforts of the Minister for agriculture and our Tánaiste in defending that position. Just yesterday, the Minister held bilateral meetings on the margins of the Council meeting with our Italian and French counterparts.

If this agreement were to be adopted, it would require a qualified majority vote in the Council and a simple majority vote in the European Parliament. We can see this process is ongoing. I say again that Ireland is committed to implementing what is in the programme for Government. That is what the Minister, Deputy Heydon, said and I am happy to reiterate it as a representative of the Independent group in Government.

Some Deputies have complained loudly about other Deputies not being here. That is a cheap shot and we all know it. I am here to represent those Deputies. Looking around, some of the Deputies who complained are no longer with us.

As mentioned by the Minister, Deputy Heydon, the broader international trade context is also important for Ireland. Trade and our international partnerships have always been fundamental to our economic model. Within that framework, we continue to advocate for solutions that are fair, sustainable and reflective of our values. That is both for Ireland and our EU trading partners.

Ireland has long championed free, fair and open trade. This has been central to our economic model and our farming community would absolutely support that position. Our EU membership connects us to a growing network of best-in-class free trade agreements, which support jobs, facilitate investment and uphold stringent EU standards in food safety, plant and animal health. They also advance environmental and human rights protections globally. We know that trade is essential to securing prosperity, sustaining employment and attracting investment. When new agreements are balanced and fair, it is in Ireland's interest to ratify them swiftly but, as emphasised by the Minister, Deputy Heydon, balance is always key. That remains central to the Government's approach.

The European Commission presented its final package on 3 September. Ireland repeatedly raised our concerns about climate, biodiversity and deforestation, as well as the need for strong protections and assurances for the incomes of Irish farmers. We have always been clear that such agreements must defend our most vulnerable sectors and that farmers' livelihoods must not be undermined through weak or ineffective environmental standards in other countries. As I said, this position is clearly outlined in the programme for Government, which we signed up to. I will again repeat that it states that Ireland will "Work with like-minded EU countries to stand up for Irish farmers and defend our interests in opposing the current Mercosur deal." That has not changed. I am happy to say that here today.

I assure the Dáil that the Government, including the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and other Ministers, as well as officials, have continued to engage actively at EU level with both the European Commission and counterparts in member states, including like-minded countries, to voice our concerns and interrogate the outcomes of these negotiations. This engagement has been essential in assessing whether the agreement adequately addresses Ireland's priorities and to our efforts to negotiate more favourable outcomes. In terms of the overall package, it is important to say that this engagement is ongoing.

Any reasonable observer will agree that the Irish Government has worked strongly and assiduously to build and be part of that blocking minority. The Tánaiste and the Minister for agriculture had many discussions with like-minded countries in recent months. Those discussions continue. It is also important to say that for Ireland, there would be significant opportunities in software and telecoms services, financial services, engineering, life services, food and beverages and education. However, serious concerns remain about agriculture. They are crucial for me. Once again, I come back to what we committed to in the programme for Government.

This agreement has dealt with many of the issues raised by some of my colleagues about labour rights, sustainable production, women's economic empowerment and more. Crucially, the Paris Agreement would become an essential element of the deal, enforceable through dispute settlement and allowing for the suspension of the agreement in cases of serious breach. In that spirit, the Government will continue to engage constructively and assiduously with other member states and the Commission in the following weeks as we seek to ensure the best possible outcome for Ireland in the final vote.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** I welcome all the farmers who are here tonight. If the Mercosur deal is ratified by the European Union, it will sound the death knell for thousands of farmers in Ireland and across the European Union. The European Union's mission statement is to promote the well-being of its citizens by providing freedom, security and justice. This deal is contrary to these principles. Freedom is democracy. Democracy is not being served here. The deliberate splitting of the deal into two takes away the majority vote, thus undermining the process of natural law. Changing the deal from an associate agreement to a partnership one is underhanded, deceitful and a betrayal of the Irish farmers. The importation of 99,000 tonnes of beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry will wipe away financial security from every family farm in Ireland. It will result in huge losses of income and undermine the prospects and any ambitions of young people to continue farming into the future.

The people of Ireland are not naïve. They know this imported beef and poultry will not be subject to the same high standard as the Irish produce, bringing with it a high risk of banned pesticides, hormones and antibiotics being used and entering our food chain. There is a real possibility of long-term health problems down the line. This is why this deal must be scrapped. This deal is being done with one of the biggest beef barons in the world, JBS, which has been trading on the New York Stock Exchange since June of this year. Coincidentally, it also contributed over \$5 million to the Trump presidential campaign. Over 75,000 ha of rainforest has been cleared this year alone. Deforestation is not only destroying the Earth's natural resources of oxygen but also trampling on the human rights of the indigenous people of that area, with some paying with their lives.

The farmers in my county of Wexford are bitterly opposed to this deal. They are fully supported by the Wexford IFA, including the current deputy president, Alice Doyle, and Jer O'Mahony, who stated on South East Radio that farmers are totally and utterly opposed to this deal. I welcome this Sinn Féin motion and I hope it will receive full support from all the TDs in the House.

**Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin:** Irish agriculture, public health and the environment cannot be sacrificed for the sake of Ursula von der Leyen selling more German cars in South

America. The time has come for Government TDs from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents to stand with farmers instead of speaking out of both sides of their mouths, running with the hare and pulling with the hound. We have a large farming community in south Wicklow and north Wexford the members of which know that this deal is not good for them. The negotiations have concluded and the deal is done. Now is the time for people to decide if they are for or against it. It is very simple, get off the fence.

The Mercosur trade agreement is a terrible deal for agriculture. It is dangerous for Irish and EU consumers and deadly for the environment. Sinn Féin's motion calls for cross-party support to send a clear message that Ireland opposes this agreement. On Thursday last, I stood outside this House with all the farming organisations. I have met with farmers from across Wicklow and Wexford on many occasions. I welcome those who are here tonight. Not one of them supports this deal, which is absolutely wrong on every level and which will sound the death knell for Irish agriculture. The Government's response to date has been lacklustre. It has taken a sit-back-and-wait approach rather than fighting for the interests of Irish farmers and all consumers of Irish food. As already stated, the negotiations are now finished and the deal is done. Now it is time to decide and, basically, get off the fence.

Our beef is produced to world-class standards, yet we are forced to compete against cheap, inferior and substandard chemical beef from South America in respect of which there is little or no traceability. The agreement will devastate agriculture and accelerate the environmental destruction of rainforests, which are basically the lungs of the earth. All farming organisations are opposed to it. I salute them in the context of their strong presence here tonight. I ask the farmers of Ireland who do so to please stop voting for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the parties that are selling them out. If this continues, it will be the equivalent of a turkey voting for Christmas in future.

We are sending a united message tonight that this deal must be stopped. It is not too late because the Government must do everything possible and work with other member states to use a blocking minority at the EU Council in December. This is a terrible deal for everybody.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I welcome all the farming organisations here tonight. As a TD from rural Monaghan, I very much support them.

Time and again, Irish farming families have been tasked to rise to challenges, whether it is absorbing inflationary shocks within their already too meagre margins or meeting ever-increasing environmental challenges. They do exactly what is often asked of them. What they expect in return is a Government that puts in place a framework that they can work within. Successive Governments have failed to live up to their part of that agreement. It sometimes seems that farming families in Ireland are bearing witness to a national conversation as to whether their livelihood should be culled. This Government was party to trade negotiations which would see their produce replaced with a lower-quality South American alternative. Assurances offered by successive Ministers were not worth the paper they were written on. The so-called safeguard that emerged has been welcomed or endorsed by virtually no one. This deal will see upwards of 100,000 tonnes of beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry flood the European market. That produce will not be produced to Irish standards in the context of the use of pesticides, hormones or antibiotics. It is grossly unfair to lecture Irish producers on the

environment and animal health, on the one hand, while, on the other, allowing them to be undercut by those not held to the same standards.

This is a bad deal for Ireland and it must be rejected. I say to the Government of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Independents, that they need to stand up against Europe and not let the Mercosur deal happen.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** I thank na Teachtaí Kenny and Newsome Drennan for bringing forward this motion. I welcome the farmers to the Dáil.

This Mercosur deal has been dubbed "the cows for cars trade deal" by many who rightly believe this trade deal will overwhelmingly contribute to a climate crisis that is already out of control. Those who did the cows for cars deal do not care about the programme for Government. This deal is completely incompatible with our commitments under the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5°C, a target we are already set to miss. It will significantly boost trade in goods that have a high environmental impact, such as soya, poultry and, in particular, beef, and contribute to widespread deforestation. Between 2001 and 2020, the Amazon rainforest decreased in size by over 54.2 million ha and lost almost 90% of its trees. That is an area the size of France. The Taoiseach made a virtue out of attending COP30, which is taking place in the home of the Amazon rainforest, to show other leaders how seriously Ireland is taking climate action. We cannot call for climate action and biodiversity protection at COP30 one week and wave through rainforest destruction the following week, all for the sake of a pat on the head from German car manufacturers.

Mercosur is going to hurt Irish beef and poultry farmers. The meat that will enter the EU market will not be subject to the same regulations as those that apply here, which means that there will be few or no safety standards. We need to ensure high standards across the board in the context of food quality and maintain our binding commitments. Our solidarity must lie with Irish family farmers, with the indigenous South American people defending the world's richest ecosystems and with the generations who will inherit the consequences of the decision that has been made. The Mercosur deal is not about trade; it is about agricultural vandalism.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I thank all the farmers from every corner of the country who came to the Public Gallery tonight in order to listen and pay attention to this debate. When the Gallery is full, people often play to it. We have plenty of play actors in here tonight.

We are here on serious business, namely the Mercosur trade deal. As Deputy Fitzmaurice stated, the agriculture committee spoke with the Polish agriculture committee this evening. We are also speaking with the French agriculture committee and with committees in a number of other countries. We need to build alliances with like-minded countries. We are hearing on the grapevine that the Irish Government is not doing that to the level it needs to do it.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** That is not true.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** We are also hearing that the Government will come in here and tell us one story but that when the officials go out to Europe, they put a different story to the

Commission. That needs to change. That is the reality. People can deny that all they like, but we see it in the text of the Minister's speech. The Minister stated that the Government is concerned about the Mercosur trade deal and that it is looking at the text. It is very vague and irresponsible. We have to take this matter seriously. The only way we can do so is for all of us to work together.

We welcome the fact the Government did not oppose our motion tonight. However, we fear it will not oppose the Mercosur trade deal with the heartfelt commitment that is needed to win this battle on behalf of the farmers in the Public Gallery, the thousands of farmers throughout the country and the hundreds of thousands of consumers in Europe that need this deal to be blocked. That is why we are here tonight. We are here to ensure that this Government is held to account.

The Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, referred to the programme for Government. The programme for Government is no good if it does not deliver. The only way it will deliver is if the Minister, and we have a new Minister now with competency in the area of trade, Deputy McEntee, who will have to go out and work on this deal. I ask that we could meet the Minister. Certainly, I would like to meet her in the coming week to put it to her that all of us need to deliver on this.

*Members applauded.*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies know that is not standard practice.

Question put and agreed to.

## **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

### **Transport Infrastructure Ireland**

71. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will defer the January 2026 toll increase; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63433/25]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** From the eye-watering price of petrol and diesel to the spiralling cost of insurance, drivers are being hammered with skyrocketing costs at every turn. I ask the Minister of State if he will defer the January 2026 toll increase and if he will make a statement about it. It is a clear political choice from Government, the Ministers and all their supporters. Will the Government have the same courage of its convictions as it did before the elections, when the Minister himself called for the toll charge increases to be scrapped?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney):** I thank the Deputy for his question. First, I want to state that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is at COP30 and that is why he is not here tonight to answer questions. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I are here to answer the questions.

It is important to point out that the Minister for Transport has no formal role when it comes to tolls. The setting of tolls is a statutory function of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and

in line with that, the TII board proposed a limited number of toll increases for 2026 on the M50 and the Dublin tunnel, together with changes to toll rates on eight public-private partnership, PPP, routes. The setting of the maximum toll rate each year is largely driven by inflation calculations based on the consumer price index and set out in the by-laws for each toll scheme.

Revenues collected from tolls on the M50 and the Dublin tunnel are invested by TII in the operation and maintenance of the road network. Revenue collected from the eight PPP roads are used by the PPP companies to fund ongoing operations and maintenance activities, as well as to repay loans arising from the construction of the road.

It is important to point out that with regard to private cars, tolls on six of the eight PPP schemes will not change in 2026, with the exceptions being the M3 and M4. In relation to the Dublin tunnel, the tolling arrangements also serve an important demand management function to ensure that non-HGV traffic does not impede the transit of heavy goods vehicles to Dublin Port. To ensure that the tunnel can continue to fulfil its core purpose, a €1 increase in that toll that applies to southbound traffic in the morning was deemed appropriate. Tolls on the tunnel at other times remain unchanged.

Finally, I wish to add that road tolling aligns with national climate policy and the principle that the user pays and that if tolling revenue did not exist, it would be necessary to use additional Exchequer funding to ensure that the national road network is maintained

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I hear the Minister of State's response but it is very disappointing because he, the Government and the Minister over in Brazil are trying to wash their hands of it. However, the general public and the voters will see right through this because during the last general election campaign, the Minister himself called for the toll hikes to be scrapped.

Has there been a change of mind since then or was it never really meant by the Government? Was it another broken promise in the run-up to the election? Denying responsibility is not going to satisfy people. They know that the Government has the power to stop this because a previous Government did it.

In a rare move in 2023, the then Government actually listened to the Sinn Féin proposals and deferred the toll increases from that January for a period of six months. While that sticking plaster type response did not go far enough, it was better than what the Government is currently planning, which is putting more burdens on drivers already crippled by some of the highest prices for petrol, diesel and insurance in Europe.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** First, I cannot speak for people who made election promises in manifestos. I am here to deal with the question tonight and that is what I am here to do. I note there are 11 toll roads in the State of which ten are on the national roads. The East-Link-Ringsend bridge toll in Dublin is on the local road network. Of the ten tolls, there are two public tolls, namely, the M50 and the Dublin tunnel tolls. Revenue from these tolls is collected directly for TII by operating companies under TII contracts. It is also important to say that the toll by-laws for each individual road set out the basis for calculating maximum tolls each year. The maximum tolls are calculated for each vehicle category and TII, which is responsible for collecting the toll, calculates the maximum tolls for the Dublin tunnel and the M50 and decides the actual tolls that should apply. The PPP companies calculate the maximum tolls for the eight

PPP concessions and propose the actual tolls that should apply. The mechanism for these calculations is set out in the by-laws. It is important they are there for the maintenance of the road.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The Minister of State has not answered the question about deferring the tolls and whether the Government is going to do that. It has the power to do it and there are other measures it can also take to cut the cost of living and the spiralling costs for drivers. We outlined these in a Private Members' Bill last week, which we will be voting on tomorrow evening.

The progress that was spoken about in the response last week is as absent as the counter-motion, which was supposed to be issued last week, but which never materialised when we were in here in the Chamber.

Is it progress that the Government is standing by while the insurance companies rip people off? Is it progress that the Government punishes drivers who, for whatever reason cannot afford to pay their motor tax upfront and pay it in instalments? Is it progress to hike up the cost of petrol and diesel through the carbon tax increases, which some people in the Minister of State's Government do not even believe that they have anything to do with? These are hitting lower income and rural drivers who rarely have an alternative option.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** First, the question here is about the tolls and what they are doing. To recap again, there were previous tolls on eight PPP roads, the M50 and the Dublin tunnel. There were toll increases in 2025.

At the moment, there are no changes for cars with the exception of a 10 cent increase on the M3 and M4 tolls. There are also increases for goods vehicles across all schemes, a 20% increase for heavy goods vehicles of more than 3.5 tonnes having four axles or more on the Kilcock to Kinnegad section of the M4. Not every toll is being increased. The inflation and the CPI index shows that there was a 2% inflation increase between August 2024 and August 2025 and this is within the by-laws.

In fairness, the money raised by TII is used for the maintenance, safety and development of our roads. If we do not have that money, where do we get it?

### **Transport Policy**

72. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the scheme for free travel for five- to eight-year-olds; if he will report on the roll-out of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63434/25]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** If the Minister for Transport was here, I would ask him to report on the scheme for the free travel for five- to eight-year-olds. I would also ask him to report on the roll-out of the scheme.

This has been heralded for a long time. I do not know how much money was spent on it or what testing was done but there have been problems with it. We have had complaints that the

cards do not actually work. There seems to be problems on both Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann services. What is the Government doing to address them?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer):** I thank the Deputy for his question. I have no doubt he will join me in welcoming this initiative, which was launched in September and extends free travel on all public service obligation, PSO, services to children between five and eight years of age. This initiative was announced as part of the budget 2025 package of measures and delivers on a key programme for Government commitment to make public transport more affordable and accessible for families. The extension of free travel for children under nine builds on the 2017 introduction of free travel for children under five on subsidised public transport services.

The initiative is important as it both makes public transport more affordable for families and develops a familiarity with using public transport from an early age that will hopefully continue much later in life. The National Transport Authority, NTA, has advised that the card application process is straightforward and efficient and to date, cards have been issued promptly to eligible children. Approximately 25,000 cards have been issued since 4 September, reflecting strong uptake. While some concerns were raised about the practicality of applying for a card for each child, this requirement is necessary for several reasons: children may travel alone or with different adults; and current validator technology does not permit multiple taps of the same card within a short timeframe, which prevents accidental double-charging. The Leap system, introduced in 2011, is now a legacy platform and cannot support new features such as multiple identities on one card. Individual cards also allow operators and the NTA to monitor usage, providing valuable data on the success of the scheme in promoting public transport usage. The child Leap card expires at the end of the month in which the child turns nine, after which they transition to a child Leap card offering a 67% discount on adult fares. These measures, along with the NTA's recent fare zone adjustments, aim to make public transport more equitable, inclusive and affordable for young people.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** It is true we in Sinn Féin support this measure but it has to work in practice. I agree it is good there have been 25,000 cards and agree on the gathering of data to ensure public transport is available to more children and citizens into the future. However, the roll-out has not been going to plan. First of all, it took about a year to get it off the ground and the scheme was not officially launched until September. Even worse, some of the cards required to access the scheme do not work. Parents have contacted us to say not only does their child's Leap card not work but many bus drivers had not heard of the scheme. That is hardly a ringing endorsement of a successful roll-out. The NTA has confirmed to us there are problems with the scheme and has claimed the issues will be resolved when a fix is found and proper testing carried out. How is the Minister of State planning to do that? Why was this situation not anticipated and dealt with before September?

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I will bring the Deputy's concerns back. As he knows quite well, the whole piece of the individual cards and the validators on Luas and rail is about ensuring there is not accidental double charging. I disagree with him on the uptake - 25,000 since 1 September is quite a significant uptake. Equally, it is important to recognise that since the launch over 9 million Leap cards have been issued, accounting for €2.7 billion in fare payments.

The fundamental core architecture is nearly 20 years old and cannot absorb further functionality. We must work with the NTA to ensure it is accessible and practical and we have as many people using public transport as possible.

I will bring back the concerns the Deputy expressed because we share common ground. It is about accessible, affordable public transport and increasing usage. We must make it easier for people to use the card. This has been a successful scheme but I take the Deputy's point on board.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The Minister of State mentioned introducing subsidised public transport services. I want to raise the issue of rural children being excluded from the scheme because it has not been extended to commercial operators. At a recent appearance at the transport committee, David Conway from the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland said his operators are excluded from the scheme. He found that surprising given they are included with some other elements. Our heavy reliance on commercial transport operators in rural areas is maintained because public transport has not been expanded over the years as it should have been. As a result of this failure and lack of planning, some parents and children have no choice but to use a commercial operator. They were included in the young adult fare scheme but have not been included in this. That is the call from that organisation and from many people in rural Ireland who are obliged to use the commercial operators.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** The budget of this year has provided for the continuation of the free child fares on PSO services. The Deputy raised commercial bus operators. The previous Government decision did not include provisions for extending free travel for children reliant on commercial bus operators. While the NTA is responsible for licensing commercial bus services, any decisions regarding fares charged by these services are managed by commercial bus operators themselves, who largely operate without State subvention. Notably, the young adult card scheme was broadened three years ago to include eligible services operated by commercial bus operators on an opt-in basis, with individual operators choosing to participate and the NTA compensating them for the agreed discount. We must encourage and provide for the continuation of public transport for people in rural areas, in particular. As the Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, I was in Kilkenny this morning at a seminar on that. I look forward to working with the Deputy to have that extended.

### Electric Vehicles

73. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider undertaking a review of the current regulatory regime in place for escooters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63600/25]

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** Will the Minister of State consider undertaking a review of the regulatory regime for e-scooters? He will be aware of the Road Safety Authority survey earlier this year which showed nearly a quarter of regular e-scooter users have been involved in an accident and one third have been involved in a near miss. We know the number of accidents involving e-scooters on our roads is increasing and that 416 e-scooters had been seized by An

Garda Síochána as of 6 October this year. We have no regulatory regime in place for the users of e-scooters and I am keen to see action on that.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** As Minister of State with responsibility for international and road transport, logistics, rail and ports, I wish to begin by noting that e-scooter users, like cyclists and pedestrians, are vulnerable road users. Their safety is of paramount importance when regulating for safer roads in Ireland. To that end, regulations providing for and governing the safe and legal use of e-scooters on Irish roads were introduced in 2024. The ongoing development of segregated road space is also vital to improving safety for this group of users.

The 2024 regulations cover a wide range of requirements, both usage and technical, including for speed, weight, capacity and power, as well as prohibitions on, among other things, carrying more than one person, the carriage of goods and the use on footpaths. While there is no prohibition on the sale or possession of e-scooters which exceed the statutory parameters, any e-scooter that falls outside of these regulations remains illegal to use on public roads or in public places.

The full list of regulations can be found on the *gov.ie* website. If an e-scooter or user is in breach of the regulations, An Garda Síochána may seize the e-scooter and may also impose a fixed-charge notice to the value of €50. In addition, e-scooter users, as for cyclists and e-cyclists, must obey the rules of the road. The operation of the legislation through enforcement is, as for all road traffic law, under the remit of An Garda Síochána. My officials meet regularly with An Garda Síochána to discuss matters related to road traffic safety. As with any legislation, I will consider feedback on its operation from An Garda Síochána and other stakeholders and I will act if it is clear that road safety improvements can be made.

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** The Minister of State will be aware of recent reports of e-scooters being sold openly in Irish shops which do not meet those safety requirements and are, therefore, illegal to use on Irish roads. My fear is we are becoming an outlier in western Europe. In France and Germany, e-scooters and, therefore, the users need to be insured. In Italy, e-scooters need to have a licence plate and be insured and registered. There is a requirement on users to practice safe use of e-scooters.

One interesting aspect of the German model is e-scooters have to come with an operating permit and, to get the permit, the e-scooter must comply with requirements including having a maximum speed of 20 km/h. That enables its sale on the German market.

The time has come to not just look at general regulations. These are different vehicles from push bikes and separate from the use of infrastructure by pedestrians. They are mechanically propelled and that has to be taken into account in the regulations. There is a need for an operator permit model.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I share the Deputy's concerns. The growing number of incidents, accidents and near misses is becoming an issue. As the Minister of State responsible for road safety, I will be reviewing this. I say to him and take this opportunity to say to parents as well that if they are thinking about buying an e-scooter, not to buy one for a child under 16 years of age, please. Many other technical requirements are needed. It is important, especially when you consider the devastation caused by an accident. We have only to look at what happened

last weekend in Louth. I sympathise with all the families there. To have such a devastating incident and collision and to see five lives just disappear is profoundly sad for all the families and communities. An e-scooter is a vehicle and a machine. It is important we make sure people are safe on them.

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. The other aspect of this I am worried about is that anecdotal evidence from my constituency and around the country suggests that e-scooters are being used in many cases to facilitate antisocial behaviour, and because they do not have to be registered to an owner, there is no accountability regarding the vehicle. There are concerns about visibility for other road users. As the Minister of State said, there are also concerns about footpaths being used to facilitate e-scooters, all of which is illegal. The introduction of a regime with registration or insurance requirements would make sure the user would have accountability.

Any regulatory regime would have to acknowledge that e-scooters create convenience for a lot of road users and that they are part of our overall active travel approach. However, a regulatory regime must strike a balance between the need for convenience and the need for safety, not only of e-scooter users but of other road users as well. I would love to work with the Minister of State and other Ministers to bring forward a regulatory regime that would bring that accountability to the use of e-scooters while maintaining their safe use for convenience.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Deputy for his support and offer because working together is how we will improve safety. I will be talking to my officials about the evidence that has come back since the regulations were brought in in 2024 to see whether patterns have been seen. However, I believe there is a huge lack of understanding of what an e-scooter can do, the power it has and the speed it can go at. We have the regulations and there is an enforcement issue there. I see on the roads people on these scooters without a high-visibility vest, helmet or protection and sometimes without lights. I ask how these people are on the roads and not being taken in. It is an issue. It is a growing problem and I will be looking at it. Road safety and the prevention of accidents and near misses is important. We have to make the road safe for everyone.

### **National Development Plan**

74. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the development of his Department's sectoral investment plan following the national development plan review; if there is a date for the publication of this sectoral investment plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63319/25]

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** Will the Minister of State provide an update on the development of his Department's sectoral investment plan following the national development plan review? Is there a date for the publication of this plan?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The Department of Transport's annual capital allocations from 2026 to 2030 were confirmed in the review of the national development plan published by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation in

July. In recognition of the importance of advancing projects in the transport sector, of the €102.4 billion allocated across Government Departments, €22.3 billion has been allocated to the Department of Transport in addition to the €2 billion to advance MetroLink under the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund.

The Department is currently finalising its national development plan sectoral investment plan in the context of that capital funding envelope and we expect to be able to publish it by the end of November. When it has been published, it will show the projects where the money will be spent, be it on public transport, public roads, active travel or other measures. We look forward to its publication.

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** Capital investment is badly needed to expand the availability and quality of public transport services. I look forward to seeing the planned projects. It is critical that works commence on the various infrastructure projects that are badly needed.

For the day-to-day running of our public transport system, PSO funding is important, particularly for bus routes. Before the budget, we heard a funding gap existed between PSO funding and the funding needed for existing services and that this gap could have ranged up to €250 million. Will the Minister of State clarify if this gap still exists and whether the NDP will need to be dipped into in this regard? The funding was increased in the budget but there was no breakdown of how much would be eaten up by existing services. Will the Minister of State outline how much of the PSO funding allocated in the budget will be used to maintain existing levels of service, including the current fare reductions and existing public transport services?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The PSO has been increasing. Why? It is because public transport services are increasing, demand is increasing and we are providing more services. Under the national development plan review, there was a reset of the money available for the PSO. I am satisfied that there is enough money there to meet the existing PSOs and for further development when we publish the new scheme.

It is also important to say that, with the national development plan and the sectoral plan we will produce, we will be looking at a wide range of projects that are ready or in the process of being ready for development in the next five years, such as under BusConnects, in roads, new rail and enhancements of existing rail. The Deputy will be aware that a lot of work is going on in our constituency in Oranmore and Ceannt Station to develop infrastructure to make it ready for additional services. I look forward to their delivery in the next five years.

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** Can clarity be provided on how much of next year's PSO funding allocation will be used to address the existing funding gap and maintaining existing services? Will the Minister of State provide a breakdown of that, if possible? PSO funding constraints are causing difficulties in the roll-out of services. We know that from our constituency as well. For example, Athenry has been waiting a long time for a bus service. The risk here is that if the PSO funding is not adequate, we will not have a roll-out of services and we could see existing services cease or fares increase for commuters.

This also comes at a time when Bus Éireann is considering the viability of many of its Expressway bus routes. Has the Minister of State or the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, met Bus

Éireann management regarding the Expressway route feasibility review? Do they intend to intervene on this issue to ensure the Expressway services across the State are maintained?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I do not have figures on that particular detail of the PSO funding because it was not part of the original question. I can, however, get those figures for the Deputy or they will probably be in the published NDP when we bring it out.

On Bus Éireann services that are being reviewed, I have met representatives of Bus Éireann, as I am sure the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has, but I will confirm that.

As the Deputy will be aware, there is increased demand. For instance, on the rail line between Galway and Limerick, when the piece of the western rail corridor we built between Athenry and Ennis opened, there were 132,000 passenger journeys in the first year. Last year, there were 750,000 passenger journeys. That is the type of increase we are getting. The Deputy knows this. He supports public transport. We are trying to keep ahead of the posse so we give all passengers the experience they need to keep them using public transport rather than going back to cars.

### **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

*Question No. 75 taken with written answers.*

#### **Public Transport**

76. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Transport the actions his Department is undertaking to deliver contactless payments on all public transport; the estimated timeline for the introduction of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63320/25]

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** Will the Minister of State outline the actions his Department has undertaken to deliver contactless payments on all public transport and the estimated timeline for the introduction of this?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Like the Deputy, I am eager to see next generation ticketing rolled out on the Irish public transport system. I look forward to seeing its introduction as part of BusConnects Dublin before ultimately being delivered across the entire public transport network. Many people have seen contactless ticketing systems in other countries and feel like it is taking a long time to deliver here. As I have previously explained, which was in the reply to another question I did not have to answer, we introduced the new Leap ticketing system as the financial crisis took hold and investment in updated ticketing technology was held back. The good news is that we now have the funding available to make the move to new ticketing technology and the National Transport Authority, NTA, has entered into a contract with Indra to deliver the project.

The initial focus of the project is on the greater Dublin area, to be rolled out in four phases. This is a major, complex project, with an estimated capital cost of over €160 million to implement it in the greater Dublin area alone. Phase 1 is due to launch in September 2027. It will test contactless payment on a number of new validators or ticket machines. Phase 2 will

be ready in summer 2028, allowing passengers on Dublin's bus and Luas services to use the next generation ticketing technology, including contactless payments on validators. Plans for phases 3 and 4 remain under development at the moment.

The project's governance structure is in line with the governance requirements of the infrastructure guidelines and, as an ICT project, it has been subject to appropriate scrutiny under Circular 02/2016. At a recent meeting with the NTA, the Minister emphasised the project's importance to the travelling public. He is looking forward to rolling out next generation ticketing over the next years.

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** It is disappointing to hear that this important development will not be rolled out for a number of years. As the Minister of State said, many other countries have had contactless payment options rolled out for years. However, we are still waiting for a trial run for the Dublin bus network, never mind elsewhere in the State. It is reflective of the wider failure of the current and previous Governments to keep up with technological advances. Another example of this is that TFI currently has five different smartphone apps for different public transport services, including a journey planner app, a Leap card top-up app, a taxi driver database app, an app for public transport tickets and an app for local services in certain parts of the State. Clearly, there is a need to amalgamate some of these apps to make getting public transport a more user-friendly and accessible experience. Are there any plans to streamline these apps? Does the Minister of State intend to engage with the NTA on this?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** With next generation ticketing, there is much to take into account, since the scope of what it will deliver covers all public services, buses, trams and train stations, including bus validators, ticket machines, ticket vending machines, station gates, tram and train platform validators, and an account-based ticketing solution delivered on modern cloud-hosting technology. It is important to note that it is not just a matter of giving somebody a card or going contactless. This is next generation ticketing and it will be used for a good number of years. It is not like a Leap card system, which is very simple. It is important to make sure that whatever we use is fit for purpose and is tested before it is rolled out fully. It is better to do it right and make sure it is right at the end.

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** I ask the Minister of State to comment on the streamlining of the various apps that exist to make it an easier experience for commuters. In addition, making a virtual Leap card available would be a major step forward in making the public transport system more user-friendly. The Leap card was first launched in 2011, for the Dublin area, and 14 years on, there is still no digital or virtual version available. Such digital cards exist in many cities around the world. They include the Clipper card in San Francisco and the Presto card in Toronto. Are there plans as part of this to develop a digital or virtual Leap card? Is there any timeline for same?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I will have to check that out for the Deputy and see what plans there are. When we are introducing a new system like this, as has often been seen in the past, if it is not done right, it can cause huge problems and there can be significant anxiety and frustration when the system is not working right. The idea is to introduce a small number of bus, tram and

train validators, test them and prove their functionality first. It is important that we do that before committing to large-scale deployment.

I agree with the Deputy that we were slow to get to this. Owing to what happened in the economy in 2007 and 2008, this was put on the back burner because it was not deemed to be essential. Nowadays, with the demand for public transport and people wanting to use it, we have to provide this technology to make sure that people get tickets and get onto trains, buses and trams with ease.

### **Air Services**

**77. Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Transport to provide an update with timelines for the restoration of the Derry to Dublin air link. [63485/25]

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The announcement by the Government after such a long time that it will restore funding for the Dublin to Derry air link is extremely welcome. The population of the north west of Ireland is about 500,000. The removal of this air link was devastating and continued to devastate us for a long time. We need to get it restored as soon as possible. I want to get timelines for when we will have this link restored.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Deputy Mac Lochlainn for the question. I am taking it for the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who cannot be here tonight. The programme for Government includes a clear commitment to engage with relevant stakeholders to establish air connectivity between Dublin and City of Derry airports. The Department of Transport is progressing the preparatory work necessary to establish a Dublin-Derry public service obligation air service in 2026. This service will enhance connectivity for the north west of the island pending progress on an upgrade to the A5 road transport corridor by the Executive, to which the Government has made a €600 million funding commitment.

As Deputy Mac Lochlainn will appreciate, significant engagement is required to establish this service. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has met representatives of Donegal County Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council and City of Derry Airport, where progress on the establishment of this service was discussed. Officials from the Department of Transport are engaging closely with the Department for the Economy in the North, the Department for Transport in the United Kingdom and City of Derry Airport, as well as with the European Commission in relation to any potential state aid implications and obligations. This close engagement will continue over the coming months.

Stakeholder engagement is also vital and in this regard a market sounding exercise is being progressed by the Department of Transport for publication in the coming weeks. This exercise will seek views on the specification required to meet expected demand for the service in terms of aircraft capacity, fare structures, frequency and timing of services. It is also expected that this engagement will confirm the interest in and recognised benefits of the PSO air service for stakeholders in Derry and the wider north-west region. As Deputy Mac Lochlainn will know, following this, it is anticipated that a tender for the PSO air service will be published by the Department of Transport early next year, with a view to services commencing by October 2026, or earlier if operationally feasible.

The Deputy has been a long-time advocate, to be fair to him. When he and I served in the Seanad, he raised this matter there too. I assure him that the current timetable is the optimal timeline to ensure that the detailed work required to establish a service on this route can be completed so that a new service can be launched successfully. As he knows, the shared island fund is committed to this. I look forward to working with the Deputy and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on delivering services for the people of the north west.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Some 40% of the passengers who use the City of Derry Airport are from Donegal. The Minister of State understands the geography of Derry and how close it is to Donegal. It serves a region of about 500,000 people. If he gets a map of Ireland out, he will see that, unfortunately, we do not have a motorway connection. Our hearts have been broken with the A5 delays. We do not have a direct rail connection from Derry to Dublin and on to Donegal, so this air link is vital. It has been a long battle but it is good news and I welcome the Government's funding of it. I would like to bring it forward as soon as possible. From talking to the airport team, they feel confident they can do this in the first half of next year. I ask the Government to work in partnership with the airport. Let us take this project home. It will be a good news story for all the north west when it happens.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I understand Deputy Mac Lochlainn's need to get this expedited. He makes a good point about there being no rail and no motorway, and the A5 delay. We should compliment the wonderful Local Link service in Donegal. The Deputy right. I will bring his comments back to the Department officials. I assure him that the current timeline proposed is the optimum one to ensure that important stakeholder engagement and the preparatory work are completed and we can deliver this important service. He is right that we share this. It is an important service that needs to be delivered. It would provide subsidised transport connectivity for the people of Derry and, by extension, Donegal, particularly north-east Donegal. It would also complement the Donegal and Dublin PSO air service which serves the western region of Donegal well. It is important that we have joined-up connectivity for the north west. It will improve transport connectivity. I concur with the Deputy that it is necessary.

In addition, the proposed timeline has also taken into account the lead time, which is necessary for the successful carrier to set up operations and sell fares on the new route. I assure the Deputy that, from our end, we will not be delaying this. We all want to see this service up, running, supported and used, because it is critical. I take the Deputy's point on board.

### **Public Transport**

78. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to ensure that public transport is fully accessible to all; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [62394/25]

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** My question is about the changes arising from the roll-out of BusConnects across Dublin and the accessibility issues that are coming into focus. We need to ensure that our public transport system is fully accessible to all who rely on it. I ask the Minister of State to outline the plans to ensure that public transport systems like BusConnects and the improvements being made to the Dublin Bus network are fully accessible to all.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** From a policy perspective, the Government announced the national human rights strategy for disabled people on 3 September 2025. Pillar 5 of the strategy, "Transport and Mobility", contains a number of transport priority actions, which I am proud to say will be led by our Department. The strategy puts great importance on engagement with disabled people.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, met with members of the disability sector on 29 September last for a constructive dialogue around our shared ambition to ensure 100% transport accessibility in Ireland. I have also met them. The Minister and I welcomed the opportunity to hear views on transport accessibility and the pillar 5 actions at the start of the new strategy. It was a valuable and rewarding exchange with disabled persons organisations, service providers, disability user groups and board representatives from transport operators. I believe that only by engaging with those who have lived experience of disability can we truly remove the barriers they face daily. I commend Ciarán Delaney from Cork, who has briefed me extensively on this very important issue.

In short, I want disabled people, whether they live in urban or rural areas, to have the same access to choice in their transport options as everyone else. As Deputy Ó Muirí will know, there are three aspects to improving public transport accessibility: ensuring a universal design approach in all new infrastructure, addressing legacy infrastructure deficits and enabling independent travel. We have an ambitious programme of investment planned for the next five years, all of which will adhere to the principles of universal design and, therefore, help deliver a more inclusive transport network in the years ahead. The real challenge is legacy infrastructure. To give an example, the major accessibility upgrade which opened at Athy station on 4 November was funded from this programme. The Minister has increased funding under the accessibility retrofit programme by 67% this year when compared to last year. We will maintain that increased level of funding under the new NDP.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** I fully support BusConnects. As the Minister of State mentioned, there is major investment going into that programme, which has been under way for a number of years. Nonetheless, it is important that it is accessible. The Clongriffin corridor of BusConnects is heading for CPO in my own area, and it will plug into the great work done by Dublin City Council on the C2CC. However, we have had accessibility issues raised with us by constituents in regard to phase 7 of that roll-out.

The 123 bus service in my and Deputy Heneghan's area was well used and was an essential service for many. It has now been replaced by the NTA with a new route, the 73, which travels down Gardiner Street on the east side of the northside, leaving elderly commuters with an additional 400 m to walk to get to O'Connell Street and to get back to the bus. How is this accessible for elderly commuters? If people are heading back to the northside, there is now no stop between Ormond Quay and Eden Quay, which is a distance of nearly 1 km. How is this accessible for elderly commuters? For citizens with mobility challenges, this is a very serious barrier to accessing the north city centre.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** The Deputy's points are relevant, and I will take them back to the NTA and Dublin Bus. It is not about making it difficult for people. It is about ensuring they can have accessibility. The work we are doing to make public transport accessible for older or disabled people must not count for nothing. It is about that reliability piece, but it is also about

accessibility and not creating a barrier. I will bring that back. The other point that is worth making is that while the retrofit programme is important, if we cannot have the bus stop at the nearest point for people to help them to access public transport, we are missing something. I will certainly bring the Deputy's comments back to the relevant stakeholders.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** I welcome the ambition to add to the capacity of Dublin Bus's network and to make it more efficient. They are the fundamental principles of BusConnects. The benefits to the city and the wider Dublin area, all the way from the suburbs into the city centre and beyond, are enormous. However, there is still some way to go. To go back to the 73 service, buses are bunching, with two or three buses in a row and then no bus coming for 30 to 40 minutes. Again, senior citizens are left standing. The bus stop on Eden Quay does not actually show on the stop that it is the 73 service, although it shows 73 bunched on the digital display. Older citizens are unhappy using the new stops on Gardiner Street because, to be honest, they just do not feel safe after dark. While I welcome the overall thrust of BusConnects, the NTA has to look at these issues. I appreciate the Minister of State's offer to bring the issues back. I ask him to do that so the NTA can respond and actively listen to citizens, in particular older citizens who use that service every day.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I also wish to raise the issue of the 123 service. Multiple constituents, in particular the elderly and people with disabilities, are very upset about the change. They had a routine set as to where the bus was ending, but now there has been a change, not only of the bus number but also the destination. I welcome that the Minister of State will look into this. These people are set in their ways. They really liked what was there and they are upset about the current status. Deputy Ó Muirí and I receive the exact same emails on this. The elderly and people with disabilities need this to be looked at and they need the 123 service to finish near O'Connell Street, where it once did. That will make it more accessible, get people into social situations and allow them to go about their day-to-day business.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I thank the Deputies for their comments. I do not have the specific answers to their questions but I will take them back. I thank them for the geography lesson on Dublin city and routes 73 and 123. The points the two Deputies make are very important. If we are asking people to have independent travel and encouraging the 15-minute concept of the city, then older people need to be able to access public transport. There is no point in having free public transport if they cannot access it. The points made by both Deputies are very relevant.

In the broader context, it is critical for the NTA to communicate, engage and respond proactively and actively to what the Deputies have raised tonight. It is about the citizen. It is about the active travel user. It is about the disabled person and the older person. The Deputies have very eloquently given testimony on the importance of older people being able to use public transport. I will communicate their views to the NTA. I apologise that I do not have answers to their specific questions, but I will take their views and concerns back.

## **Bus Services**

79. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on the upgrade of real-time tracking of Dublin Bus services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63502/25]

**Deputy Emer Currie:** I ask the Minister of State for an update on the upgrade of real-time tracking of Dublin Bus services through a new national automatic vehicle location system, which was due to start testing this year, roll-out next year and be completed in early 2027 to improve customer communications, particularly around ghost buses.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I thank the Deputy for her question and for her ongoing engagement on the matter of Dublin Bus services. Like her, I am eager to see improvements in real-time tracking, not just of Dublin Bus services, but nationwide across the whole public service obligation, PSO, fleet. The Dublin Bus automatic vehicle location system feeds information to the bus operator's control room, TFI Live app and on-street signs. It dates from 2009. A new automatic vehicle location system is due to be rolled out initially on Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland Dublin city buses. I expect this will lead to significant performance improvements and improved quality of information for bus passengers.

The NTA is currently in the system-testing phase of the project. As the system is very large and complex, this activity will continue and will be repeated as necessary until the NTA is satisfied that features work as intended and that all major defects are resolved, in order for the NTA to be confident that the solution is fully functional and sufficiently robust to be installed on buses. Subject to the systems successfully passing the detailed testing phases that are under way, a pilot implementation is scheduled to commence early next year. Assuming no issues are found during the pilot, full roll-out on buses in Dublin and other cities will commence next year. The roll-out should be complete in early 2027. In total, approximately 1,800 buses nationwide will have to have the new system installed on them. This is part of a wider effort to update vehicle tracking infrastructure across the PSO fleet and to improve public bus systems through BusConnects in our cities, which will improve both the accessibility and reliability of our bus system, particularly through the construction of core bus corridors.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** The TFI app has a star rating of 1.4 in the app store, and that is pretty damning. The Minister of State might remember that the last time we were here, we exposed that in one year, 2022, only €97 was spent enhancing Dublin Bus services in Dublin West. Since then, I have had a commitment that €700,000 will be spent in 2025 on addressing capacity and punctuality issues on routes 39A, 37 and 38. I had previous commitments here about route 70. That investment cannot come soon enough, and we actually need more now.

I welcome the confirmation that the new automatic vehicle location system will undergo a pilot. It had been mooted for this year, but now it is to be early next year, with the full roll-out thereafter. I would like to hear more information about that pilot. In what areas will it work, how will it work, and will customers be a part of it? I suggest using Dublin West. The new system can rebuild trust in the bus network, with no guesswork and no contradictions. Real-time information must mean real accountability.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** There is nothing on which I disagree with Deputy Currie regarding the matters she has raised. As she knows, the NTA has responsibility for the planning and

development of public transport infrastructure, including the development of real-time systems. The Deputy made a good point on the app. The rating is quite poor. To be fair to her and other Members, but her in particular, she has raised the matter repeatedly. I know from talking to people who work and live in Dublin that they are concerned about the lack of real-time information. I will ask the NTA to engage with the Deputy directly on the matters she has raised because, to be fair to her, she deserves an answer, as do the travelling public. If there is no reliability, what we are trying to do will fail completely, particularly in respect of engagement with customers.

As the Deputy knows, the NTA has awarded a contract to Trapeze to implement and support national automatic vehicle location for all PSO buses. I will ask it to engage with the Deputy also because it is important that the specialist transport systems company hear from users and public representatives articulating the frustration and views of the travelling public. We are seeing growing demand in public transport, but in tandem with that we need to see the app working because, as the Deputy knows quite well, if confidence in the app is lost, the whole system falls down. I will engage with the Deputy again.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** If the Minister of State is engaging with the NTA, I would like specific answers about the pilot and how it is going to work. There are currently two issues: the forthcoming automatic vehicle location system and real-time information on the app. I was assured that the team was reviewing the end-to-end process of cancelling services on the current real-time passenger information system to see where improvements could be made. Apparently, there are six technical staff working collaboratively with a similar number of personnel from the transport operator. They are in regular contact. I would like to know what improvements have been made in 2025 regarding the communication of cancelled services. There is no point saying the system works well, which I hear in responses to my parliamentary questions, and that most people find it very useful if it leaves customers stranded on the side of the road expecting a bus when none is coming, with no explanation or apology. Sometimes, it is the last bus due that does not turn up, which is unacceptable when travelling alone and in the dark. So many young people contact me to say this is the case. It should be a simple ask to tell passengers if a service is not running, not just in the automatic vehicle location system but also in the current system.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** She has made a very fair point. The network redesign and delivery by the NTA has continued over the past four years. It has rolled out the sixth phase of the redesigned bus network in Dublin, which includes state-of-the-art ticketing and providing cashless and account-based ticketing across bus and other public transport networks. We have seen new bus liveries, standardising the exteriors and interiors of buses across bus operators, along with new bus stops and shelters, but also providing enhanced bus stops with better route, fare and timetable information.

I will certainly ask the NTA to come back to the Deputy on her point on real-time passenger information. If people have no confidence in real-time passenger information, we are at nothing, leaving the whole system to break down.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** There is a rating of 1.4 on the app.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I fully concur that a rating of 1.4 on the app is not good enough. I know from my city, Cork, that people are concerned about buses not turning up, be it the late-night bus or the last bus, which the Deputy mentioned. We really have to improve on this. I will ask the NTA to engage directly with the Deputy.

### Bus Services

80. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Transport when the promised increase on bus route 132 will finally happen, given the increased traffic volumes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63503/25]

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** The only public transport from most of west Wicklow to Dublin is the 132 bus. We have no trains. It travels only four times daily, with the last bus leaving Baltinglass at 3 o'clock and the last leaving Dublin at 5.30 p.m. Last April, I met officials of the NTA and was told a very significant increased service – representing a doubling – was happening later in the month. Nothing has happened since. This is exceedingly frustrating.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Deputy Timmins for the matter he has raised tonight. As Minister of State in the Department responsible for transport, I recognise the vital role that enhanced connectivity plays in supporting communities across rural Ireland, including in County Wicklow. The Deputy raised it during the last Question Time. I reassure the Deputy that improving the accessibility, reliability and affordability of rural public transport, while ensuring the system remains well-funded and responsive to passenger needs, is a core priority under the programme for Government.

The NTA plays a central role in achieving this as it has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally, and for the scheduling and timetabling of these services in conjunction with the relevant transport operators. The NTA and the operators, including Bus Éireann, are in continuous dialogue regarding the operational needs, subject to funding and resource availability.

The NTA has advised the Department that plans to enhance route 132 are at an advanced stage. The Department of Transport sets the overall policy direction and funding framework for the delivery of public transport services nationwide, including Connecting Ireland, which has delivered over 180 new or improved services since 2022, connecting more than 240 towns and villages to the public transport network. The 2026 PSO funding allocation of €940 million represents a significant 43% uplift in the allocation from last year. This allocation will allow existing public transport services to operate reliably and sustainably throughout the year in the face of growing passenger demand and increased operational costs. In addition, a further €31 million has been secured for rural transport next year, a 38% increase on last year's funding. This ensures the continued delivery of vital services across rural Ireland to meet demand, especially for the communities most dependent on these services.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** All those things are wonderful around the country, but they are having zero impact on the 132 service. After much correspondence, the NTA is now saying this cannot progress as the Department of Transport has placed a hold on uncommitted expenditure for new public transport services. Can this issue be resolved? Many people have

approached me saying they would use the service but cannot because of the limited timetable. The last bus leaves Baltinglass at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and the last leaves Dublin at 5.30 p.m. In fact, there is now a proposal to abolish a Thursday service from Carnew, which joins this route in Baltinglass. Therefore, the service is actually being reduced.

The Department advises that it and the NTA are currently engaging in relation to funding the PSO programme. The Minister is saying funding is not a problem. To say I am deeply frustrated is an understatement. Can we please get to the bottom of this?

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I understand the Deputy's frustration. He is right to be frustrated because it is important that we have connectivity. I am informed that the enhancement of route 132 is planned under Connecting Ireland. Operational decisions regarding service delivery are the responsibility of the NTA in collaboration with transport operators, subject to funding and resource availability. I will happily sit down with the Deputy and talk to him again about this because it is important that we enhance connectivity, do not discommode people further and allow people the convenience of transport connectivity and accessibility. As the Deputy knows quite well, post-budget discussions around the allocation of funding for the PSO programme are ongoing. It entails regular engagement between the NTA and operators on resource needs. I am acutely aware of the issues the Deputy has raised with me both here in the House and in private, and I will certainly work with him to ensure a service between Carnew and Baltinglass so the people of Baltinglass will not be discommoded further.

I do not have positive news for the Deputy right now, but I will sit down with him and talk to him further on the matter, because it is important that we enhance Connecting Ireland for the people of the area he has spoken about.

11 o'clock

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the possibility of engaging with him further on the matter.

Another issue I have had is that many people contacted me complaining about the reliability of the service due to cancellations. Recently, I received a text describing how 20 people waited at the bus stop for the 9.40 a.m. 132 bus to Dublin, but it did not show up again. That is 20 people whose day and plans were ruined. If there is an issue, can a back-up plan be put in place? Another issue, which I have witnessed myself, one that is unforgivable, is buses departing earlier than the scheduled time and people missing them as a result. There must be zero tolerance for this.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** There is no excuse for people missing buses or buses leaving before the scheduled time. It goes back to Deputy Currie's point about real-time information. The important point is that we have an increase in demand. There is a real commitment by the Government to ensure that the services we operate, particularly in the areas the Deputy mentioned, meet the need. Again, as I said to the Deputy, I will engage with the Deputy, the NTA and Local Link to ensure that we see services and accessibility as part of what he spoke about tonight. It is not about discommoding people but rather, offering accessibility and connectivity, as well as having that choice which we have not seen up to now.

As Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, it is a core priority of mine and of the Department to ensure that commitments in terms of enhancing rural transport are met. I will happily engage with the Deputy further on the matter.

### State Bodies

81. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the recent salary increases of CEOs of commercial State bodies under the aegis of his Department; if he has discussed these increases with the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services, Reform and Digitalisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63377/25]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Is mian liom ceist a chur ar an Aire Stáit mar gheall ar na salaries that have recently been announced for a number of incoming CEOs. Those salaries concern commercial State bodies under the aegis of the Minister of State's Department. Has he discussed these increases with the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** My Department has 19 agencies in total, 12 commercial and seven non-commercial, which have either a CEO or commissioner running the organisation. All CEO and commissioner contracts under the aegis of my Department have terms and conditions based on sanction received from the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. All CEO salaries and benefits are published in the company's annual report and financial statements, in keeping with the business and financial reporting requirements of the 2016 code of practice for the governance of State bodies.

In 2024, the senior post remuneration committee carried out a review of the remuneration arrangements for CEOs of commercial State bodies. This was the first such review since 2011. It was necessary to align CEO salaries with the market and to deal with recruitment and retention issues in commercial State bodies. The results of that review were published in March of this year. Following that review, the committee designated salary bands with defined salary parameters for each commercial agency. Requests received by the Department within those parameters are considered and approved by the Minister and then require sanction from the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. No salary increases for a CEO under the aegis of my Department are approved without the prior sanction of the Minister for public expenditure.

Since the publication of the review and associated salary bands, two of the 12 commercial agencies under my Department have been awarded salary increases. Both of these agencies, Iarnród Éireann and Bus Éireann, were undergoing recruitment campaigns for new CEOs. Any increase in salaries that has been sanctioned following this process is in keeping with the salary band provided for these posts by the senior post remuneration committee review.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Of course we need to ensure that we have the best people for the job but it is not all about top dogs and the CEO. In a cost-of-living crisis, will the Minister of State outline the reasoning behind these salary bumps, some of which are over 33%? This morning, I listened to representatives from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Ireland on the radio outlining that more and more families, particularly middle-income families, are seeking its help

because of the massive increases in the cost of living in respect of electricity, heating and grocery bills. In Kerry alone, over 20,500 dinners were provided to families across the county this year. That is in stark contrast to salary increases of over 33%. Does the Minister of State have any thoughts in that regard?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** First, the salary increases are in line with the aegis of the Department of public expenditure and reform and the guidelines set out by it. It is important to say that salaries of CEOs are in line with the responsibilities they take on. They vary from agency to agency, depending on the responsibility they have, the number of people working in the organisation and all that goes with that. With State and semi-State agencies, it is important that we have people in control who are able to progress Government policy, expenditure and infrastructure changes, especially in the area of transport where at all times we are trying to improve our roads, rail and all of our transport infrastructure. It is important that we attract the best people to these jobs. It is a fine balance. I hear what the Deputy is saying but it is a fine balance between having these State agencies operating in an effective manner and carrying out their jobs properly while also working within the bands set out by the Department of public expenditure and reform.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** That would be fine if there were also fair pay for workers and families, many of whom are also working in essential services. We need fair pay for them. The decision to abolish the pay cap is going to increase wage inequality. There will be a much bigger gap between the CEOs and the people who are doing the work on the ground. In the recent budget, supports to help people with the cost-of-living crisis were ripped away.

Last year, the CSO identified that in-work poverty stands at 5.9%, meaning approximately 145,000 people in employment are living below the poverty line. Earlier this year, research from the ESRI showed that when housing costs are taken into account, the figure is even higher. In a society of nearly full employment, nearly 15% of the State's population is living in poverty, including one in five children. They are the workers who need a pay rise. The Government must step up and introduce a living wage for all workers, rather than just bumping up the salaries of the people at the top.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** The Deputy talked about the minimum wage but the minimum wage was increased in the budget. It is important to keep a balance on the discussion. When it comes to people at senior management level, you are trying to make sure that we get the best value for money. In the context of the Department of Transport, as billions of euro are being invested in transport, that is important. Every chief executive who is working within transport and is responsible for the running of these organisations has a lot of people and responsibility. It is important to say that we have the right people in those positions. I do not disagree that there are people who need more pay but it is not related. The performance has been tested and there is a demand for people who can run the agencies to get the best out of them. It is about getting the best value for money in order that money is not wasted and we have money to pay for other services. That is important. The balance has to be kept in that regard.

## **Transport Policy**

82. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has examined international best practice in public transport app design; if lessons from other jurisdictions are being considered in the digital strategy for TFI; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63379/25]

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** Has the Department examined international best practice in public transport app design? Are lessons from other jurisdictions are being considered in the digital strategy for TFI?

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Deputy O'Connell for taking this question. I thank her for the question. Like her, I am eager to see best practice being implemented across our public transport sector, including passenger technology. As we heard from Deputy O'Connell and from Deputy Currie earlier, it is a very important matter. Public transport apps are not simply about having a technological solution for the sake of it. Rather, they are about having information available to people so that they can make the best use of our public transport system, especially those who may be new to it or have difficulty finding the best way of making their journey. It is also about having the confidence and that piece around reliability.

The NTA is responsible for several mobile applications, including the TFI Leap Top-Up; the TFI Go mobile ticketing app; TFI Anseo demand-responsive application; and the TFI Live mobile application, which are used for journey planning and for the provision of real-time information to customers. In all cases, the NTA works extensively with the supplier to deliver the best possible result.

The NTA has collaborated with other public transport authorities on an app design. As an example, the NTA has worked closely with Transport for Scotland on a redesign of TFI Live. Unfortunately, progress has been slower than anticipated because of a lack of mobile application development capacity with the source supplier. While the TFI Live application does function and does present journey planning and real-time data to customers, the NTA is currently investigating options to expedite improvements to the application to improve the customer experience.

One project that will produce improved quality journey data to the TFI Live app is next generation automatic vehicle location, AVL, which replaces five old automatic vehicle location systems with a new centralised solution, to provide higher quality and consistent data outputs to the TFI Live mobile app. This project is going to pilot in March 2026, with the full roll-out taking approximately 12-18 months, which I look forward to seeing happening. I will conclude by saying that people often express their frustration to me about the performance of the app. It is something we need to improve on and work with Members of the House to see this delivered.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** The Minister of State highlighted some of the issues. Deputy Currie also highlighted the issue of ghost buses and the unreliability of the app. Deputy Timmins also highlighted this issue as well. It is also very frustrating that there is not one single accessible platform. There are effectively five different apps that people might find themselves having to interact with to plan their journey. There is the journey planner, a taxi driver database and the Leap top-up. It is really extraordinarily complicated, particularly for someone who is new to it or not digitally savvy, for whatever reason. Addressing this type of

issue really needs to be important if we are going to encourage people to rely on public transport and give up their car and move to public transport. Even if it is only part of their journey and they do use other forms of transportation, if that part of the journey becomes unreliable, and people cannot rely on or navigate the apps, all of these things will be barriers to trying to get these transformations and modal shifts.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** The Deputy makes a very good point in the context of that one platform. The NTA has responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the development of the related technological systems. As I said earlier, the NTA has awarded a contract to implement and support a national automatic vehicle location system for all public service obligation buses to Trapeze, which is a specialist transport systems company. It is envisaged the work being done will enable the NTA to consolidate several existing and disparate bus AVL systems into one central system to be used by all PSO bus operators in Ireland. It has expansion capacity to meet the growing demand for public transport in Ireland. The point being made is that we all need to live up to the ambition to make it easier for people to use the app and mobile applications. The Deputy is right. It would be great if we had one platform. The point I need to work more on with the Department is in the context of whether this can be done and, if so, when we can do it. I will take the Deputy's points back and I thank her for raising the matter.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** I am delighted to hear the comments are being taken on board. At the moment, we expect we might have to hop off a bus and onto a Luas or a DART, but we have to hop between applications as well to do it. This is not something that makes it easy for people to use our public transportation network. I appreciate the Minister of State's comments about the regional providers as well and that he is looking to include them more in terms of an overall bus network so we are not hopping between different apps. From the users' perspective, they believe there should all be one seamless process and they should not have to try to figure out who is providing which service to know how to access it. I welcome the Minister of State's comments and look forward to developments on this matter.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** The point that Deputy O'Connell has made in terms of the users' perspective is one we must listen to and recognise. The Members tonight have expressed frustration in terms of ghost buses, lack of real-time information, no buses turning up at all and being late or leaving early. It is an issue we need to have further engagement on by the NTA, with Trapeze and the Department, in the context of how we can make it easy for the travelling public to have an application that functions and that enhances rather than acting as a barrier to their journey planning and usage in respect of the provision of real-time information to the customer. It is the customers who are important, and I thank Deputy O'Connell for representing them tonight. The NTA is currently investigating options to expedite improvements to the application to improve the customer experience. I will bring the comments from Deputy O'Connell and other Members of the House back, and, hopefully, we will see improved quality for the travelling public as a consequence of tonight's questions.

## **Rail Network**

83. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the condition of DART and train stations across Dublin Bay North (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63444/25]

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I rise to speak about transport across my constituency, especially regarding the DART and to see overall investment in the DART train stations in Clontarf, Killester, Harmonstown and Raheny and up to Clongriffin and out to Howth. There is a huge need for investment. I understand there is going to be a large investment going in. My issue is that I was at multiple meetings of residents and they had not been consulted on the current changes to the platforms. This is the matter I would like to raise.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Deputy very much for raising the question. I assure him my Department and the agencies that work under it are all fully aware of the need to ensure we have a transport system designed for all users and accessible to everyone. We have made progress in this regard in recent years, but still there is a lot to be done. We are committed to that work in the years ahead to deliver on the ambition of pillar 5 of the new national human rights strategy for disabled people.

Turning specifically to rail, Iarnród Éireann continuously works to enhance accessibility upgrades to all stations and services, and the investment programmes, to ensure that accessibility is integrated from design stage to fruition. This includes engagement with the Irish Rail disability users group and other disability representative bodies throughout the course of design. Focusing on the specifics of the Deputy's question regarding DART stations in north Dublin, these stations are inspected and maintained on a continuous basis to ensure Iarnród Éireann meets the required standards in terms of accessibility and customer experience. All DART stations in north Dublin are accessible by means of a lift, platform or ramp. The big lift programme saw investment in existing lifts at 52 stations across the network between 2020 and 2024, significantly improving lift reliability. The liftcall system is also in place at most station lifts, ensuring live monitored access and preventing vandalism and anti-social behaviour.

All stations undergo cyclical work and general maintenance, with minor station improvements as required. For example, Iarnród Éireann is currently replacing stairwells at the Clontarf Road station that were due for renewal. Iarnród Éireann is satisfied at this time that no station is in current disrepair. However, if there is a specific issue at a particular station that the Deputy wants to raise, I would be happy to go back to Irish Rail-Iarnród Éireann on his behalf.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I thank the Minister of State very much for that reply. A lot of the DART stations on the northside are currently not updating their social media quickly when lifts are unavailable to let people with accessibility issues know this is the case. They then get off at the station, and have to go through the process of getting to another station. In relation to what I said about the Donaghmede estate residents, we have changes going on in the Donaghmede-Howth Junction station. Iarnród Éireann has insisted it did a leaflet drop in the area to consult the residents, but I was at a meeting of more than 150 residents and they had not received a single leaflet. I have emailed Iarnród Éireann through our Oireachtas email query facility. I would like it to be clarified by Iarnród Éireann when the leaflet drops happened and the information notices were displayed in the Donaghmede area, what streets and estates

were included in these drops and the corresponding dates on which this occurred. I ask this because the company is not answering my queries, so I hope it might answer the Minister of State.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I am just looking here at information for the Howth station. Some general maintenance and cyclical work are being carried out, including line marking and nosing on stairwells. An anti-slip surface will be placed on all stairwells. Access to all platforms via lifts or stairs is the accessibility element. On the Deputy's specific question of what Iarnród Éireann did before it carried out works and the notification thereof, I will go back to the company and try to find out what it did and get the answers for him. If he wants to give me the specific questions, I will go back to Iarnród Éireann on them.

Of all the stations, many are mentioned in the reply. There are ten or 12 stations and work is being carried out on them all to keep them all right with accessibility on every one of them: ramps to platforms, ramps and lift to platform 1 and a ramp to platform 2 and platforms via accessible ramps. The accessibility standards have been set out for each one of them. The one in Clongriffin underwent significant improvement works and the tender has gone out for the replacement of the stairwells there. On that lift and stairs, Iarnród Éireann does not own the stairs and lifts that lead to the coast development and has not at any time been responsible for their maintenance. Maybe my things are getting confused as well.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit and I appreciate that he will address that. It is ridiculous that when it comes to the next election, it is politicians who will be taking the brunt on public transport, as the Minister of State knows himself. When I send an email, from the office of a Deputy, I do not get a response from Iarnród Éireann asking for a clear date and time of when a drop happened. The northside has been neglected for far too long. I do not know if it was previous TDs on the northside who went fighting for them or what was happening. There are some stations that only have shelters for the southside users. This is something I am trying to fight for, but if you look at this, people in Donaghmede and Kilbarrack did not receive a leaflet drop. Their station is going to be changed. The people who use that station to commute to work every day would definitely have a better say than some engineer who is going to be plopped onto that project and will not have a clue about where there needs to be a ramp for a buggy or for someone who has accessibility needs. That is why I would like if the Minister of State would, and I appreciate that his office will, look in on behalf of these residents to see why they were not consulted because they have a right to be.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I accept what Deputy Heneghan is saying in that we have to have public engagement when we are carrying out works so people know what is going on. The Deputy might send to my office what the issues and problems are and what the stations are. He mentioned Kilbarrack there. It says here line-marking and nosing of stairwell and it talks about surface repairs but, if the Deputy sends me the list and the time the works were carried out, I will get an answer for him.

It is an important thread that is coming through all night in the questions. Where you have customer dissatisfaction, the important thing is that if we hear about it and we try to get corrective action. At the end of the day, my philosophy and that of the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is that if somebody is using public transport, we

need to give them a response and an experience such that they will continue to use public transport and be able to rely on it. That is important, especially for people with disabilities. I know Deputy Heneghan is very passionate about that.

### **Road Projects**

84. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the action his Department is taking to progress the Mallow relief road project; the current status of this project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [63270/25]

**Deputy Colm Burke:** What action is the Department taking to progress the Mallow relief road project? What is the current status of the project, and will the Minister of State make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I thank Deputy Burke for his question and his ongoing advocacy on behalf of the people of Mallow. He has been very proactive on the matter.

As the Deputy will know, approximately €502 million of Exchequer capital funds has been provided for national roads through TII to local authorities this year. Included in this is an allocation of €700,000 for the Mallow relief road, which is progressing towards the completion of a preliminary business case and planning application. This scheme consists of a northern bypass of Mallow, with the objective of removing traffic travelling between Killarney and Mitchelstown or Fermoy from the town centre.

This scheme is a priority for me and for the Minister, Deputy O'Brien and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, because as the Deputy knows, through his ongoing engagement and that of Councillor Liam Madden working with him, there is a real need for this road to be prioritised and developed. This will provide increased scope for development and public realm improvements in Mallow town centre, greatly improving the benefits for residents. The people of Mallow will also benefit from reduced congestion and improved air quality. Reduced congestion in the town centre will encourage walking and cycling and improve safety. The project will also act as an enabler for compact growth in the centre of Mallow, which is a national strategic outcome.

The project is currently in the design and environmental evaluation phase, which follows the conclusion of the route selection process. As part of this phase, there was a minor change of route at the western end of the scheme due to an interface with a Gas Networks Ireland transmission main and to reduce the level of impact caused by the earthworks. Cork County Council aims to complete a preliminary business case for the project by the end of this year. Subject to a satisfactory review by TII of the preliminary business case, it is expected that an application for planning permission for this project will be submitted to An Coimisiún Pleanála in the second quarter of 2026. I look forward to working with Deputy Burke to ensure the project progresses and reaches a satisfactory conclusion.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister of State. As he knows, Mallow is quite close to Cork city. There is a huge volume of traffic now passing through Mallow because it is coming from either the Killarney side, the Fermoy-Mitchelstown side or the Limerick side. It is all

coming into Mallow town. We need to prioritise this project because it is really having an adverse effect on the town as regards the volume of traffic.

On the bypass road, I understand there was an issue in relation to the Gas Networks Ireland line, but surely national authorities should know where major strategic lines are? We know where overhead cables are. How did a delay like this occur? I am concerned that we will have further delays unless we make sure we have all the t's crossed and i's dotted when we are submitting for planning. I am anxious that we would submit for planning at the earliest possible time so we can progress this project.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I share Deputy Burke's view that we expedite this as fast as we can. He is right; it is an important infrastructure piece. I have not got the answer regarding the Gas Networks Ireland interface. I will certainly ask the NTA to communicate with the Deputy because he is right. The relief road project will provide an enormous benefit to the town of Mallow. The Deputy has, with Councillor Liam Madden, been very strong in his advocacy. Businesses in the area have been equally as vociferous in pressing for the bypass to be built as quickly as possible. I am, with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Department, committed to ensuring for the people of Mallow that the Mallow relief road is built as quickly possible. The Deputy rightly highlighted the gridlock in the area. I was there recently. I had to drive from Fermoy to Knocknagree. I went through Mallow and it is a bottleneck. This road will bring huge economic improvement, not just to Mallow and its people but to the wider region. I look forward to working to ensure we expedite the project.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** It also ties in with the Cork-Limerick road and the importance of that development. We are 20 years on and we need to make sure that project moves on in the same way as this bypass road for Mallow. With regard to the volume of traffic travelling on that road, some mornings at 5.30, as I am driving to the station to take the train from Mallow to Dublin, there is a volume of traffic coming against me, even at 5.30 in the morning. It is extremely important that two major centres of population, Limerick and Cork, do not have serious road infrastructure in place. We need to make sure that grows, that this plan is also put in place and that a planning application goes in for that as well as the relief road in 2026.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, like Deputy Burke and I, will be familiar with and recognise the importance of the N20 project. It is critical and it is lacking. It is the deficit in the infrastructure connecting the western corridor. People rightly complain from many perspectives but, from an economic perspective, it is absolutely imperative that we advance the motorway and that Cork-Limerick road.

Equally, I concur with the Deputy in the context of the importance of infrastructure being improved in the Mallow area. I suppose it is the gateway to many areas in the Munster region. Given its location, as the Deputy rightly said, Mallow has substantial volumes of north, south, east and west traffic. It is important that we alleviate the traffic congestion and allow for that flow and enhanced connectivity between Cork, Limerick and Galway. We have seen the benefit of it in terms of Galway to Limerick and I will certainly be pushing the officials in the NTA and the Department with regard to the issues we have raised here tonight. I thank Deputy Burke for his work and his advocacy in working with Councillor Liam Madden on this particular project. This is a critical piece, dovetailing with the Cork-Limerick motorway.

## Transport Policy

85. **Deputy Maeve O'Connell** asked the Minister for Transport if analysis has been completed to study the way in which or if the completion of active travel projects have had a material effect on the carbon emissions of commuters in County Dublin, or across the country. [63312/25]

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** I ask the Minister for Transport if any analysis has been conducted on the completion of active travel projects and, in particular, any impact they may have had on the carbon emissions of commuters in Dublin or across the country.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Deputy for asking this very important question. Based on large-scale surveys and analysis from the NTA's Walking and Cycling Index 2023 for Ireland's five metropolitan areas - Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick-Shannon, and Waterford - active travel is delivering significant environmental benefits nationally.

Walking, wheeling and cycling in these metropolitan areas remove approximately 680,000 car trips every day, reducing congestion and meaningfully cutting emissions. In 2023 alone, active travel saved an estimated 160,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, equivalent to 2.2 million passenger trips from Dublin to London Heathrow. In addition to environmental benefits, the economic impact of active travel across the five metropolitan areas is estimated at over €3 billion annually, alongside major and important improvements in public health and air quality.

The Deputy refers specifically to commuters in County Dublin and I am delighted to say that every day those commuters who walk, wheel or cycle are taking nearly 530,000 cars off the road in the Dublin metropolitan area. These practices are saving approximately 120,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. I have more figures here for the Deputy.

To ensure we are moving in the right direction, the NTA, in conjunction with the relevant local authorities, has produced a transport strategy for the greater Dublin area, as well as metropolitan area transport strategies for the cities of Cork, Limerick and Waterford, with one under way for Galway. These strategies set out the measures that will help us achieve a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030 and set us on a path towards zero net emissions by 2050.

To verify that the measures in the strategies are being implemented in a co-ordinated, effective and timely manner, the NTA will undertake a monitoring programme and will produce a report which will be finalised for the greater Dublin area in advance of the review of the strategy for the greater Dublin area, which is due to commence in 2026.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** My constituency of Dublin-Rathdown has seen significant change during the past five years through the development of active travel greenways and other similar schemes. Over €80 million has been spent, with €29 million allocated in 2025 alone, to support the various commitments in the national sustainable mobility policy to get people out of cars to walk and cycle instead, as well as the climate action plan which aims to reduce transport emissions overall. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, of which I was a member, led the way on these schemes. Kilometres of lanes have been built, concrete and

plastic dividers have been installed, junctions have been narrowed, filter lanes have been removed, roads have been closed and new traffic lights and traffic sequences have been installed. After five years of investment, and counting, we still do not really have any clarity as to whether this investment is actually delivering because we do not really know whether our emissions have been reduced. We have estimates and surveys but have we actually done the assessment before all of these things were implemented, and afterwards, to see whether the emissions were actually reduced?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** As I said, large-scale surveys were carried out in 2023. That is what we have at this stage. When we are investing money in active travel we want to make sure before we start that it will actually deliver what it says on the tin and we want to see afterwards if we got the necessary outputs. That is the same for every infrastructure project we carry out. There is an assessment carried out before projects are started to see what benefits they will bring. I will go back to the Department to see what other data we have or hope to get because, from my own background, I understand that if we are spending money on something, we have to find out if it is value for money, and not just in an intangible way. We have to see the facts and figures. It is important we see the outcomes that are delivered from the investment of taxpayers' money in these projects. I welcome the Deputy's question on this matter.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** I appreciate that the Minister of State and I seem to be singing off the same hymn sheet. I attended one of the original proposal meetings on what are now called "active travel schemes" back in 2020. The overseeing consultants assured us then that traffic would just disappear if we implemented these schemes. The only real, empirical report I am aware of is on Kilmacud after new cycle lanes, road closures and various other infrastructure were implemented. It showed traffic did not disappear but was just displaced, with increased rat-running car speeds. After that particular scheme, there was actually less walking and cycling in the area. Anecdotally, my constituents in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown report that they are making longer journeys than they did five years ago. For example, a constituent recently highlighted to me that when doing the big family shop, her 3 km car journey from Dunnes Stores in Cornelscourt took her 45 minutes.

One possible consequence of a lot of these investments has been increased motor vehicle congestion. I accept some people are definitely walking and cycling more. I know that from anecdotal evidence from constituents as well. However, others are driving more and taking longer journeys. My question, therefore, is whether overall emissions are up or down.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan):** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** If we cannot say, do not know or do not know yet, then do we know if we are pouring good money after bad?

**Deputy Seán Canney:** From the surveys and data I have given the Deputy, I am convinced we are reducing CO2 emissions. In my own opinion, having been talking about this issue for the past hour and a half, when we put in active travel measures we need to talk about having effective public transport. We have an integrated transport travel system that will give an experience to pedestrians, cyclists and people using public transport so they will continue to

use that. As regards some of the improvements we have to make, in order to get more cars off the road we have to be able to say to people that they will be able to get to places on time, will be able to go shopping and get a bus back, will be able to get to work because a service will be there for them, and that they will have a bit of comfort in whatever mode of transport they use. That is the challenge and with the demands we have, it is important we continue to challenge ourselves to make sure we are delivering value for money and getting the results we want.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan):** We will take Deputy Bennett's question and a brief response.

### **Rail Network**

86. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Transport the projects identified in the strategic rail review with regard to Monaghan that he intends to progress; and the status of same. [63068/25]

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** My question relates to the timeline in the strategic rail review for the return of rail transport to County Monaghan. The Minister of State may or may not know that in counties Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal we have no railway network at all. The strategic rail review provides for this and I ask the Minister of State to consider it.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Deputy for the question. It is important we discuss the all-island rail review, for which I have overall responsibility. I have a passion for rail and think it is important we restore as many of the lines as possible and do as many of the connections we can, especially in the west and north west where rail is lacking, and in the Deputy's constituency.

I met some people in Ulster in relation to the connection between Derry and Letterkenny and the line from Portadown through Down. We have the basis for this, namely, the all-island rail strategy. We have identified projects that can be done quickly and that we can get ready for implementation. When we launch our sectoral plan that will show exactly what we are doing. I am delighted the Deputy raised this specific area because sometimes we look at Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway but we need to make sure the west, north west and all around are connected by rail, as they should be, and right up into Northern Ireland, as we are doing on the Dublin to Belfast line. It is important we keep that momentum going and I look forward to working with the Deputy on that over the next four years.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan):** Unfortunately, that concludes oral questions.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I thank the Minister of State.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan):** Very briefly.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** It would be very helpful if the Minister of State could do that. I suggest he use the shared island fund as it takes in the North and South. There is a big pot of

money there that he could tap into. We in Monaghan and Cavan would like to have a rail network running through Portadown and right up to Donegal. It would be very much appreciated.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan):** That concludes oral questions.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I think I was meant to have the next question. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, to write to me via email with a response as to whether there is a review into concerns about whether Uber coming into the taxi market complies with the Taxi Regulation Act.

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** I will certainly do that.

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

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan):** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss the proposal from An Post to move operations within Mayo.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the long processing times for aquaculture licences.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the proposed construction of a waste incinerator in Ringaskiddy, Cork Harbour, County Cork.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern - To discuss issues on the BusConnects F spine and S orbital routes affecting Dublin south-west.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss the new school building projects proposed for Ringaskiddy and Shanbally national schools, County Cork.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the difficulties facing Wicklow and Wexford commuters.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss the need for a full public inquiry into the tendering and construction of Lucan leisure centre.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss access to a remediation and compensation scheme for homes built with defective block in Skerries.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the establishment of a community neuro-rehabilitation team in the Dublin and north east regional health area.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - An gá le tacaíochtaí breise a bheith tugtha do Gaelscoil Lir i mBaile Átha Cliath 24 a phlé.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss the response to Storm Claudia.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the continued closure of Dunguaire Castle, Kinvara, County Galway.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss unsafe lead levels in drinking water in Phibsboro.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the recent series of arson attacks on public facilities in north Dublin.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara - To discuss ambulance wait times in north Tipperary.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss building renovations and school accommodation in St. Patrick's College, Gardiner's Hill, Cork city.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss vaccination of cattle as a means of eliminating the TB virus.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the financial crisis at Darver National School, County Louth.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - To discuss taxi driver livelihoods in light of the introduction of Uber fixed fares.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss issues with reliability and punctuality of Cork city's bus service.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the need for immediate intervention and humanitarian assistance in Sudan.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss the need to revoke the Dundrum House Hotel IPAS contract following a High Court decision.

Deputy Emer Currie - To discuss town regeneration in suburban Dublin villages.

The matters raised by Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett, Ciarán Ahern, Michael Cahill, Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Emer Currie have been selected for discussion.

### **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

#### **Taxi Regulations**

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** There is great alarm, anger and concern among taxi drivers across the country because of the moves by Uber to introduce a fixed fare system. As outlined in the question by Deputy Pa Daly earlier, he alluded to the very serious question on whether this fixed fare being brought in by Uber actually circumvents, undermines or subverts the taxi regulation legislation in this country, which is designed to protect the regulation of the taxi industry, the livelihoods of taxi drivers and the existing fare structure based on the taximeter. This is negotiated every couple of years and takes into account the need for taxi drivers to have a fair income, while taking account of their costs and so on, rather than have price competition, which can undermine their livelihoods and their incomes. The fixed fare structure Uber is

trying to bring in is undermining that. It is undermining the taximeter and it means that taxi drivers would not get the fare they should get according to the meter.

Just in case customers or consumers out there might think this is somehow a good thing for them, they should bear in mind what happens when Uber gets its way. Even if people think in this case there might be some short-term benefit, in reality what Uber does everywhere is undermine the proper regulation of the taxi industry. Here we have proper regulation so you know who your taxi driver is. There is safety and accountability in terms of your taxi driver. It is somebody who is a proper, regulated taxi driver with a licence. What Uber does is try to get rid of all of that and introduce the situation where basically anybody at all can moonlight as a taxi driver and the industry and the livelihoods of taxi drivers are undermined. Once Uber has succeeded in deregulating the industry then it can jack up the fixed fares and can add in all sorts of charges. Currently there is accountability. There is a relationship between the customer and the taxi driver where the customer can see the meter and can see what he or she will be charged because what the charges will be is legally regulated. All of that potentially goes out the window once Uber gets in and prisms open the market.

Taxi drivers will protest this Saturday about it, they have called for a boycott of Uber, and I think they are absolutely right. Taxi drivers should delete the Uber app and they themselves should take action to get Uber out. The Government should also intervene to stop what taxi drivers rightly believe to be an action by Uber that is undermining the regulation of the taxi industry as set out in the taxi regulation Acts and in the maximum fare order.

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney):** I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for raising this. Neither the Minister for Transport nor his Department are involved in the day-to-day operation of the small public service vehicle, SPSV, sector. The National Transport Authority, NTA, the independent transport regulator, has responsibility for setting taxi fares under the provisions of the Consolidated Taxi Regulation Acts 2013 and 2016.

I am informed that on 3 November 2025, Uber Ireland introduced a new option on their platform providing their customers with a single maximum price for a trip before requesting. This option is referred to on the platform as the taxi fixed price. Usually, when booking a taxi with Uber or other dispatch operators, a price range of the approximate cost of the journey is shown. With the Uber taxi fixed price option, I understand that the customer is now provided with a maximum guaranteed price upfront. If the final price on the taximeter is less than the initial maximum price provided, users pay the lower price on the meter. If the final price on the taxi meter is greater than the maximum price, users pay the maximum price only.

From a legislative perspective, section 24 of the Consolidated Taxi Regulation Acts 2013 and 2016 empowers the NTA board to make a maximum fares order, fixing the maximum fare that may be charged by the driver of a taxi for any one journey. The current maximum fares order took effect in December 2024, and a maximum fare review is carried out approximately every two years. The NTA has conducted these reviews since 2011. It is important to note that hackneys and limousines agree their fares in advance and do not use a meter.

The NTA's most recent fare review was undertaken between November 2023 and March 2024. During this review, the NTA took account of the most significant economic issues that were relevant to the SPSV sector, which included inflation and cost of living, fuel prices and energy supply, geopolitical uncertainty and increased public transport availability. Following

this review and a public consultation on the matter, the NTA introduced the Taxi Regulation (Maximum Fares) Order 2024, which increased taxi fares by an average of 9%. This came into operation on 1 December 2024 and ensures that taxi fares continue to reflect the rising costs associated with operating a taxi in Ireland. This increase includes a special rate for the weekend peak of 12 midnight to 4.00 a.m. on Friday night into Saturday morning and Saturday night into Sunday morning, year round, to incentivise more drivers to service the night-time economy. This followed on from the October 2022 order in which a 12% increase on fares was introduced.

As set out in the legislation, charging more than the maximum fare can lead to a prosecution. However, charging below the maximum fare is permitted. The Minister understands that the Uber fixed price offer does not breach the maximum fare regulatory provisions for taxis or constitute an offence associated with the misuse of taximeters. SPSV operators are self-employed and may decide whether or not to sign-up with a licensed dispatch operator, such as Uber. They are not obliged to be affiliated with any dispatch operator. Where they choose to do so, taxi drivers are free to contract with a dispatch operator of their choice. Neither the Minister nor the NTA are parties to the commercial or contractual arrangements between SPSV drivers and their dispatch operators. Accordingly, the Department and the NTA have no role in the approval of such matters.

There is a fixed payment offence associated with the misuse of taximeters set out by the NTA in the Small Public Service Vehicle (Fixed Payment Offences and Driver Licence Period) Regulations 2022.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The point is, and the Minister of State is absolutely right, that taxi drivers can do that and many now are signed up with Uber, but they have recognised the threat that Uber represents for the industry and Uber's desire ultimately to try and deregulate the entire industry and do away with it as an industry, and undermine the livelihoods in this country of about 20,000 taxi drivers. Many would have signed up probably not knowing what the implications were of signing up with Uber. This is why they are now calling for a boycott and for the deletion of the Uber app.

From the point of view of the Government, we have a regulated industry. I believe that Ireland supported Catalonia in a legal case about establishing the right of countries to regulate their own taxi industry. That was the Government responding to pressure from taxi drivers to protect the taxi industry as a key part of our public transport system and to protect the livelihoods of taxi drivers. Companies such as Uber and others, with Uber leading the charge, want to create downward price competition, which will undermine the livelihoods of taxi drivers. They should not be allowed to do it. There may be a misconception that somehow the customer is going to benefit from this but they will be sorry in the medium-to-long-term because once Uber gets in, destroys the livelihoods of ordinary taxi drivers and deregulates the industry, it can then jack up the fixed prices to whatever it wants. What we will actually get is dynamic pricing going upwards in many cases. Taxi drivers would like to see the Government enforce its own legislation to protect the regulation of the industry, which Uber is trying to undermine.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** As I mentioned in my opening statement, the regulation of the SPSV industry, including the setting of fares, is a matter for the independent transport regulator. It is

also important to say that taxi fixed price is a new trip option recently introduced by Uber in Ireland, whereby passengers see a single maximum price for a trip before requesting it. I understand the Uber fixed price is also available in other jurisdictions in Europe. How it works is that a price is displayed in advance showing the maximum fare for a ride, and the user pays the lower of the metre fare or the maximum price fare. It is set out in the legislation that charges in excess of the maximum fare can lead to prosecution, although charging below the maximum fare is permitted. This is probably the kernel of the problem. If it is underpricing, it means it is pricing other people out of the market. This is something we can go back to and look at from the point of view of the Department and speak to the NTA about it.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is undermining the meter.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** It is but I do not think that whatever is being done at present is breaching regulations. It is using the pricing structures to bring down the price a bit, which customers will think is great but in the long term we need to have a sustainable taxi industry. This is why we set increases through the regulator, so that people can make a living from it. Being a taxi driver is not the easiest job in the world. The big issue is the dispatch operators that drivers sign up with, what the conditions are and whether they are in breach of the regulations. I will bring this back. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is away at COP in Brazil, which is why I am taking this particular question. It is not that I am abdicating responsibility. I will bring it back to him and we will have a chat with the officials about it on behalf of Deputy Boyd Barrett.

### **Bus Services**

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** I thank the Minister of State for staying with us to this relatively late hour tonight. I want to raise some issues that have arisen on certain bus routes that serve my constituency. Some routes are new and others have been in place for a while. I am a big supporter of the BusConnects project. The aim of improving connectivity across our city is very important. I have been on the record for years locally, and now here in the Dáil, as a staunch defender of BusConnects. It is precisely because of this support that it is important we address issues as they arise. I want BusConnects to work for people, so it is important that we listen to them, take their feedback on board and find workable solutions.

Unfortunately, I have had loads of constituents contact me again in the last few weeks about their own bus disconnect issues. I will touch on the problems we are seeing on the S routes first, which include the S4, the S6 and the S8 through my area. These routes were rolled out in November 2023. They have been plagued with issues ever since. It was particularly bad at the beginning of this year, and in the last couple of weeks, unfortunately, the same issues we had at the start of the year have started to rear their heads again, with ghost buses, cancellations and delays.

I was listening to the questions the Minister of State took earlier and I know that other Members have raised these issues with him also. The excuse given earlier this year was that the operator of these routes, which is Go-Ahead, was short on mechanics, and I understood that new mechanics were taken on afterwards. The service did improve but now I need to know why the same problems have started to creep back in again. We need to nip it in the bud. We

should not have people accepting that, every few months, there will be a period when the bus they rely on to get to work, school or wherever becomes as unreliable as a chocolate teapot for a period of time. The S4 and S6 serve UCD. Again, numerous students have been on to me over the last few weeks telling me they are missing lectures because the bus just never turned up or a series of buses in a row did not turn up. It is noteworthy that these routes are run by Go-Ahead. I have never been particularly comfortable with the privatisation of our bus routes and the level of service on Go-Ahead routes in general has left a lot to be desired.

I will refer directly to what one of my constituents wrote because she really hit the nail on the head. She emailed me and said it was easy to collect public contracts and revenue while leaving commuters stranded but far harder to uphold the social responsibility that came with providing essential transport to an entire region. She said that when profit took precedence over quality and maintenance, the result was precisely what passengers of the S8 endured daily, with disruption, uncertainty and disregard.

The other bus route I want to raise is the new F spine and particularly the F1 route. Since its launch in mid-October, it has faced a lot of the same issues. I have raised this with the NTA and it has held its hands up a little bit and explained there were teething issues, as we would expect with new routes, and issues with traffic light sequences. Regarding this route, constituents have been raising with me that there are longer journey times as a result of the new route, particularly from Tallaght and Firhouse. Some people find it is taking them half an hour longer on the new F route than it would have taken them to get into town on the previous 49 bus route.

It seems to me that the main issue is the fact the new route has been diverted onto residential roads, which have high levels of traffic congestion and do not have dedicated bus lanes. I am not suggesting the entire route be redrawn but I hope the Minister and the NTA will take onboard the feedback from transport users in my area. There may be a case to make that there is sufficient demand for an additional route that may more closely follow the old 49 route.

Ultimately, I want BusConnects to work but people need reliable and efficient services. We cannot allow a situation to arise where people get into their cars again because they do not have confidence in our public transport.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank Deputy Ahern for raising this important issue. It is following the theme of lots of tonight's priority and oral questions during Question Time. I am taking this issue on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who is in Brazil. I want to clarify that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, neither the Minister, me as Minister of State or the officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services.

The statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services rests with the National Transport Authority. That being said, I reassure Deputy Ahern that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this. To support this objective, the Department of Transport secured €940 million in budget 2026 in funding for public service obligation and TFI Local Link services, an increase of 43% from €658 million in 2025.

BusConnects is a transformative programme of investment in the bus system, providing better bus services across our cities. It is the largest investment in the bus system in the history of the State and is managed by the NTA. The aim of the network is to improve the existing Transport for Ireland system through enhanced services with high frequency spines and new local, orbital and radial routes.

The recently launched F spine, providing routes F1, F2, and F3, is part of phase 7 of the BusConnects network redesign and introduces high-frequency, 24-hour bus services on routes F1, F2 and 80 on key corridors, enhancing connectivity between areas such as Tallaght, Finglas, Charlestown and the city centre. This redesign also introduces new radial services on routes 23, 24, 73 and 82, and the new local route L89, to streamline the network and make services more efficient.

Ahead of implementation, the NTA undertook extensive communication efforts, distributing over 200,000 booklets to households across the areas covered by the routes. It also advertised the new services in local media outlets and online and provided detailed briefings to local public representatives. It is acknowledged that these changes require some passengers to make their journeys in a different way. In some cases, customers now benefit from direct services where transfers were previously required, while others may need to interchange.

0 o'clock

The TFI 90 fare ensures that transfers incur no additional cost.

In the days after the launch of phase 7, the NTA reported a technical fault in the Dublin Bus priority system, which adjusts traffic signals to ease bus movement. The fault lasted three consecutive days and caused unexpected delays, which understandably frustrated customers. Thankfully, the issue was resolved quickly, and performance is expected to continue to improve. While this issue was separate from the BusConnects new service roll-out, it did impact all Dublin Bus routes during that period.

The NTA and transport operators are working hard to ensure that the services are bedding in well but understand that it can take some time for people to get accustomed to any new arrangement. The kind of issues experienced at the launch of phase 7 are similar to those experienced during the early stages of implementation of previous phases that were addressed and resolved.

In terms of the S orbital, phase 5b commenced on 26 November 2023 and involved the introduction of new southern orbital, radial and local routes. The S2, 74 and L25 routes are operated by Dublin Bus, while the S4, S6, S8, W2 and L55 are operated by Go-Ahead Ireland. This phase represented a major boost in service levels of approximately 80%. To put that into context, routes 17 and 175 used to provide approximately five services an hour in each direction during peak times.

We have introduced a lot of bus routes and changed them around. I will come back in and answer a bit more for the Deputy.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** The Minister of State was just getting to the good stuff there; I see it in front of me in the statement.

Obviously, we welcome the increased investment in public transport. It is long overdue and it is great to see it. The Minister of State mentioned - and he can come back to me on this in his supplementary response - that the S6 will move to a high-frequency timetable. I would be interested to know when that might happen.

BusConnects has the potential to lead to a much better service, which is why I support it. It is right that our bus services and bus routes are being redesigned for a city that has changed immeasurably since these bus routes were first implemented, in fact following the old tramlines through the city and keeping many of the old route names, such as the 16. However, when we are bringing in new routes and redesigning a whole network, people also need to understand how the new routes will work for them. I know the NTA has said it has briefed public representatives, but people should not need to come to their TDs to have it explained to them how these new bus routes will work or how they will get from A to B again. I encourage the NTA to arrange more meetings in community centres around the city to explain the changes in these routes to people face to face. This may not be as clear when you get a leaflet through the door - if you do get that leaflet through the door, and people have questioned some of that.

The new BusConnects system requires people to change or to move from bus to bus where there may not be a direct route any more and you may be expected to change. That is all premised on a city that does not have any traffic congestion for it to work properly. We can get carried away sometimes worrying about contactless payments and things like that. People just want a reliable service from their buses. Some of that is down to our now having to make decisions to prioritise our public transport on our roads, reallocate our road space and make sure that public transport is prioritised over everything else for the greater good of the community.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I will get to the good part for the Deputy.

Many communities have benefited from the first direct connection to the likes of UCD from the Long Mile Road, Crumlin hospital, Ballyfermot, Cherry Orchard, Rathgar and Milltown on the S4, and Firhouse Road, Cherryfield and Templeogue on the S6 route.

The Deputy asked about the S6. It will move to a high-frequency timetable to improve punctuality, while the S8 will get run time adjustments to boost reliability. These improvements will go live on 30 November.

Coming back to what the Deputy has said, the important thing is that we have a reliable service, that people understand the routes and where to get on and off and that we create, as I said earlier, an experience for passengers such that they will continue to use public transport. We are investing a lot of money in public transport. We are investing a lot of money in BusConnects. We are investing money in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. The important thing is that if the routes do not work right, it is bad value for money. While we will have teething problems when we start a new route, it is important that we let people know and engage with the public, not just public representatives, and that we do so through multifaceted communication. It is important that if something is not working, we look and see how we can improve it rather than just leaving it there.

We have a lot in the Department of Transport to bring back to the NTA after tonight's discussions, and a lot of it has a common thread. Public transport is probably working relatively

well, but when there is a problem it becomes the overburdening thing in people's minds. We need to act faster to get these small imperfections sorted out in order that we have a smoother transport system. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter with me.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan):** Thank you, Minister. That was a useful education on Dublin buses.

### **Aquaculture Industry**

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** As the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, knows, I was born and reared in a coastal location, that is, the beautiful Rossbeigh beach in Glenbeigh, County Kerry, which forms part of Castlemaine Harbour, adjacent to Dingle Harbour, and includes places like Cromane, which is steeped in the history and culture of fishing. They are leaders in the art of aquaculture there. Companies in Cromane and many more throughout the country, including County Kerry, such as Dingle Seafood, Quinlan's in Cahersiveen and Kenmare and companies from Bantry Bay all the way up to the top of Donegal, supply their wares all over Ireland and different parts of Europe, including France, Italy, Holland, Spain and Germany. Exports also go to Asian countries, such as China, Hong Kong and Thailand, as well as the UK and the United States. They regularly feature on the podium of Bord Bia quality awards, showing how well regarded they are in the industry and by the accommodation and hospitality sector. Cromane mussels and oysters are famous not just here at home but all over the world.

It is the same for all our coastal communities throughout the land as the produce of the Irish aquaculture industry is much sought after by clients at home and abroad. We pride ourselves on the quality of what we produce, supply and export. We pride ourselves on the top-class companies we have. I am flabbergasted by even the thought that aquaculture licences for oysters, mussels and clams, and you could even include salmon as well, can take so long - for example, two, five, ten, 15 or anything up to 20 years. I would be very interested to know how such a scenario could come about. Is it a fault in the application system itself? Is it a computer error or deficiency? Is it a lack of manpower? I am very slow to ask, but is there a deficiency in the training of those who are assigned the task of passing judgment on these applications? Is there an unwillingness to grant more licences? This incredible waiting list is putting at risk businesses and livelihoods that are the lifeblood of our coastal communities. There must be a reason for the delay. Applicants absolutely need to know what chance their application has of succeeding and how long their business hopes and dreams may have to wait.

I have been raising this issue for many years as a member of Kerry County Council and, more recently, since I became a Member of Dáil Éireann. The Minister of State must agree that waiting up to 20 years to get the go-ahead for your businesses or for the local firm that will give you and your family members employment is totally unacceptable. We must find the reason this has happened in order that we can correct it and bring all the fine aquaculture operators on our Irish coastline, from Castletownbere to Killybegs, into the market without further delay. Young fishermen and fisherwomen can earn a decent living, build that family home, buy a car, live in their own communities and contribute to everyday life in historical fishing communities where there is no other form of employment. If, however, they have to wait years to have an aquaculture licence processed, they will bail out, many to foreign shores, never to return.

As the Minister of State is aware, I had a number of cases where fishermen and small companies submitted applications when their existing licences were due to expire. Grant aid was available to expand their businesses and they had shovel-ready projects. However, their applications were not processed on time and the projects fell by the wayside. These fishers - men and women - are very annoyed by the manner in which they have been treated by the Department. We must address these deficiencies, get our act together and get to the root of the problem. As I said, I have raised this issue numerous times. We simply must get it right.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. He has been in touch with me on a number of occasions to discuss the matter as it relates to operators in his constituency and further afield. I had an opportunity during the summer to visit Quinlan's Kerry Fish with the Deputy and see at first hand the implications of the issue.

As somebody new to the Department, I recognised from the first that there is a significant problem with licensing. I have undertaken a job of work to try to address this. It will take time but we are working our way through it. I know at first hand the positivity that exists in terms of Irish aquaculture and the demand for the product overseas. Just three weeks ago, I was in Qingdao in China with Irish fishermen, fisherwomen and processors promoting Irish seafood to the Asian market. There is a significant and growing demand, but it is incumbent the State to get the licensing aspect right. I have identified it as a priority and I am working my way through it. Insofar as I can, I will try to address the questions the Deputy asked.

By way of background, the Department considers all applications for aquaculture licences in accordance with the following legislation: the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 1997; SI 236, the Aquaculture (Licence Application) Regulations 1998; the Foreshore Act 1993, as amended; SI 477, the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011; a consolidated environmental impact assessment directive of 2014; and the Aarhus Convention. The criteria to which the licensing authority shall have regard in determining an aquaculture licence application are set out in section 61 of the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 1997. The licensing process involves consultation with a wide range of scientific advisers as well as various statutory consultees, as set out in the aquaculture regulations. The legislation also provides for a period of public consultation, the timing and length of which depends on the initial screening assessments carried out by the Department and the Marine Institute.

The current appropriate assessment process arose from a European Court of Justice case against Ireland in 2007 in which the court declared that by failing to take all the measures necessary to comply with the EU habitats directive in respect of authorisation of aquaculture programmes, Ireland had failed to fulfil its obligations under the directive. A backlog of aquaculture licence applications developed following the judgment. In the negotiations to address the judgment and enable aquaculture to continue in the Natura 2000 areas in the interim, a process was agreed with the European Commission and subsequently implemented. That process included data collection, the setting of conservation objectives by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, identifying the scientific interests to be protected in the bays, the carrying out of an appropriate assessment of the licence application against those scientific interests, and appropriate licensing, taking account of, among other factors, Natura 2000 requirements. This work involved multiple surveys being carried out by a range of contractors. Profiling of aquaculture activities was carried out for all the designated bays to

define the likely interaction between such activities and the conservation features. All of this preliminary work to prepare the foundation for the consideration of the licence application process took place from 2009 onwards. Appropriate assessments started to become available from 2011, which allowed licensing to continue.

As the competent authority for aquaculture licensing, the Department is responsible for ensuring that all applications received are screened in the context of the birds and habitats directive. This work is undertaken by the Marine Institute and externally contracted ecological resources. The current policy in regard to shellfish applications is for the Marine Institute to also provide the Natura impact statements in respect of all applications received. This is a huge resource demand on the State. In addition, an application for a marine finfish licence must be accompanied by an environmental impact assessment report. The Department currently has 36 applications on hand for marine finfish aquaculture. Renewal applications are currently permitted to operate what is referred to as a section 19A (4) application.

A major delay in processing these applications was the requirement that they be accompanied by an environmental impact assessment report. Almost all the applicants concerned have now submitted finalised applications and environmental implementation reviews. A total of 14 applications have undergone a round of public and statutory consultation, with consultation expected to be held in respect of a number of further applications over the coming months. All applications and supporting documentation are made available on the Department's section of the *gov.ie* website as part of the consultation process. As the applications concerned are under consideration as part of a statutory process, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on individual applications.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I acknowledge the Minister of State's work in this area to date and the fact that he has prioritised the issue of delays relating to the processing of aquaculture licences. He is very much on top of his brief, as I know from dealing with companies and people involved in the industry throughout my county, especially, and, indeed, further afield. I talk to all those people. I know he will pursue this to a satisfactory conclusion but, as things stand, the situation is totally unsatisfactory. It is more than annoying, particularly for the families I referred to in coastal communities in my county and further afield. I am sure he will get to the bottom of it.

It is sad this has gone on for so long. I have mentioned An Cromán many times. It is probably the oldest fishing village in the whole of Ireland. It lost out on the fishing of wild salmon and all of that, with only a small element of that there today. This is hugely important. There are young people employed in the sector. They are contributing to their local communities, building houses, rearing families and contributing to every aspect of daily life. We want to keep them there and, as I keep saying, we want to keep rural Ireland alive. I will keep raising this hugely important matter until such time as it is addressed. I thank the Minister of State for his work. I put it on the record of the House that we are lucky to have him.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I thank the Deputy. He has raised a really important issue, which is that fishing is really about protecting and preserving our coastal communities through gainful employment by way of the natural resources available to those communities. The reality is that the scientific advice clearly indicates that wild stocks are being depleted for a multiplicity of reasons. These include overfishing by third countries, particularly Norway, the Faroe Islands

and Iceland, of important pelagic stocks. Climate change is undoubtedly having an impact, with other aspects of the environment also having an impact.

We have an opportunity on the aquaculture side to do much more to protect and preserve livelihoods in these communities. I do not accept that we cannot do better in terms of the delivery of the licences. We must give certainty and security to the families who, in the main, operate these businesses. They have invested their hard-earned money and their blood, sweat and tears to get themselves to a certain point, only to find they cannot get their licence renewed. As the Deputy rightly noted, the section 19A(4) process allows them to continue but prevents them from getting the appropriate grants they need to advance their business. It is incumbent on us to get this right.

I have had quite a number of meetings. Last Thursday, I was at the Marine Institute trying to get to the bottom of what else we need to do. Additional resources have been provided and we have taken on extra head count. We are making progress but the progress made to date is not good enough. I have to take responsibility for that. I will continue to drive to get a better system in place with the structures that are there. I want to review the structures to see whether we can make changes, legitimately and legally, or whether it will be necessary to bring forward amending legislation and look at the overall structure of the way the licensing regime works in order to ensure it will be more fit for purpose and will deliver appropriately while also protecting and preserving the environment and ecology of areas and delivering for local communities.

### **Scoileanna Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta**

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Baineann an cheist atá agam leis an ngá le tacaíocht bhreise a thabhairt do Ghaelscoil Lir i mBaile Átha Cliath 24. Is ceist phráinneach í seo toisc an ualaigh mhillteanaigh atá ar an scoil bheag seo, ar fhoireann na scoile agus ar thuismitheoirí agus pobal na scoile, atá faoi stró as cuimse. Níl aitheantas tugtha do na dúshláin atá rompu agus níl na hacmhainní ná an cúnamh cuí chun tabhairt faoi na fadhbanna ná na baic bhunúsacha atá ar an scoil seo á thabhairt. Tá éacht á dhéanamh ag an bpríomhoide, Clíona Ní Dhúill, agus ag an bhfoireann atá aici. Tá ár mbuíochas tuillte acu. Níl aon duine ag lorg tacaíocht nach bhfuil ann do scoileanna cosúil le Gaelscoil Lir.

D'oscail Gaelscoil Lir a doirse i Meán Fómhair 2021 chun freastal ar phobal Iarthar na Cathrach, Theach Sagard agus an Caisleán Nua. Is Gaelscoil chomhoideachasúil, ilchreidmheach agus ionchuimsitheach faoi phátrúnacht an Fhoras Pátrúnachta í a chuireann fáilte roimh chách. Bhí 15 páiste ann an chéad bhliain agus tá 55 páiste ag freastal ar an scoil anois. Beidh siad ag bogadh isteach i bhfoirgneamh nua buan an t-earrach seo chugainn. Mar aon le chuile bhunscoil eile, tá sonas, sábháilteacht agus folláin na ndaltaí ag croílár gach a ndéantar sa scoil. Chomh maith leis sin, toisc gur Gaelscoil í, tá grá don teanga agus don chultúr Gaelach á fhorbairt i measc na bpáistí. Ní féidir é sin a dhéanamh gan tacaíocht ón Roinn oideachais ná aitheantas uathí ar na deacrachtaí ar leith atá ag an scoil seo agus í ag triail a gcúraimí a chothú go hoideachasúil.

Tá éagsúlacht mhór i measc phobal na scoile seo idir pháistí néara-éagsúla atá ag freastal ar an dá rang uathachais atá ag an scoil agus pháistí ó thíortha eile atá cláraithe inti. Tá 25% de pháistí na scoile ina gcónaí i gcóiríocht shealadach idir pháistí gan dídean agus pháistí gur

iarrthóirí ar chosaint idirnáisiúnta iad. Tá páistí áitiúla agus páistí ón India, ón Úcráin, ón Afraic agus ó thíortha eile timpeall an domhain sa scoil agus tá leibhéal ard míbhuntáiste le sonrú i measc phobal na scoile seo. Tá an Ghaeilge agus an Béarla mar theangacha breise ag céatadán suntasach páistí sa scoil seo ach níl stádas DEIS ag an scoil toisc gur bunaíodh í i ndiaidh spriocdháta na Roinne. Dá réir, tá na páistí seo gan iomlán na tacaíochtaí riachtanacha a thagann le scéim na gcúntóirí teanga, atá ar fáil do scoileanna DEIS lánGhaeilge eile. Chomh maith, toisc gur Gaelscoil atá inti ina bhfuil tumoideachas iomlán i bhfeidhm, níl na huaireanta breise atá ar fáil do English as an additional language, EAL, ar fáil do na páistí nach Béarla a chéad teanga mar is i rang a haon a thosaíonn siad ar an mBéarla go foirmiúil. Níl aon aitheantas ar na deacrachtaí ar leith do scata 15 páiste atá ag teacht ón ionad IPAS in Iarthar na Cathrach i gcomhthéacs na gcíríbeacha le déanaí a bhí dírithe orthu siúd atá lonnaithe ansin, na páistí scoile sin atá ag freastal ar Ghaelscoil Lir san áireamh.

Níl aon bhealach leagtha síos le scoil nua na coinníollacha uilig atá ann chun stádas DEIS a bhaint amach a chomhlíonadh. Tá an doras sin dúnta ar an scoil agus caillean páistí, múinteoirí agus tuismitheoirí na scoile amach ar na hacmhainní foirne, ar home school community liaison, ar mhaoiniú, ar acmhainní breise, ar thacaíochtaí breise liteartha agus uimhearthachta, ar fhorbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach agus araile. Ní féidir iad sin a fháil toisc nach scoil DEIS í. Impím ar an Aire nua, an Teachta Hildegard Naughton, stádas eisceachtúil a bhronnadh ar Ghaelscoil Lir mar aitheantas ar na cúinsí eisceachtúla atá ag an scoil seo. Tá an staid reatha leagtha síos i litir a chuir an scoil chuig an Roinn.

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin):** Gabhaim buíochas le Deputy Ó Snodaigh for giving me the opportunity to outline to the House the position in regard to Gaelscoil Lir in Dublin 24. I speak on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. My Irish is not as good as Deputy Ó Snodaigh's, so while I could understand most of what he said to me, I will not be able to respond to him in the same way, so it will have to be in English.

First, we will look at the overall position. It is important to say that the Department is committed to offering all available and appropriate supports to schools. In regard to capitation grant funding, the Department is committed to providing funding to recognised primary and post-primary schools in the free education system by way of *per capita* grants. The two main grants are the capitation grant to cater for day-to-day running costs and the ancillary grant to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff.

The Department has secured €39 million in budget 2026 towards increased capitation funding for primary, post-primary and special schools to provide additional financial support towards their running costs. This will see an increase in the standard capitation rates paid to schools of €50 per pupil for primary schools, from €224 to €274, and of €20 per student for post-primary schools, from €386 to €406. This will also allow for an increase of €20 in capitation rates for urban band 1 DEIS primary schools, increasing the mainstream pupil rate in these schools to €294. The increased capitation rates will also see special schools now receive the same rates of capitation for young people aged 12 and over, as their peers in mainstream post-primary schools.

It is important to say that the increases announced in budget 2026 are in addition to the 12% increases as part of budget 2025. The last three budgets have resulted in an increase in the

level of capitation grant rates of 49.7% paid to primary schools and 28.5% paid to post-primary schools.

The financial support services unit, FSSU, funded by the Department, is an important source of advice and support to schools on financial matters, including budgeting and cash flow management. We can send the Deputy the contact details for the FSSU. I will not call them out to him.

Furthermore, if the school should require assistance in regard to financial matters, it is advised to contact officials in the Department. Again, I will ask that the details are supplied to the Deputy.

The information provided to me tells me that there is no record of contact from this school in relation to capitation or ancillary funding in terms of additional support required, but officials from the Department will make contact with the school in order to get further details.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Tá fadhb bhunúsach leis an bhfreagra a thug an tAire Stáit. Ní scoil DEIS í. Níl stádas DEIS ag an scoil seo mar bunaíodh í tar éis an dáta. Is í sin an fhadhb bhunúsach. Ní féidir leis an scoil an t-airgead, an maoiniú ná na hacmhainní breise a fháil toisc nach bhfuil aon bhealach aici an stádas seo a bhaint amach in ainneoin go bhfuil sí ag cloí le beagnach gach uile chuid. Tá beagnach 25% de na páistí ag teacht ó IPAS nó ó chlanna nach bhfuil dídean acu. Tá 40% ag brath ar leas sóisialta. Tá fadhbanna bunúsacha ann ó thaobh an chur chuige sin. Chomh maith leis sin, tá naonúr as an 55 páiste atá ag freastal ar an scoil sin i ranganna speisialta. Tá gá díriú isteach ar na fadhbanna breise. Níl an scoil ag lorg go mbeadh aon stádas breise aici anuas ar cad atá ag scoileanna cosúil léi. Tá sí ag lorg go mbeadh bealach éigin aici stádas eisceachtúil a fháil a thugann aitheantas di. Dá mbeadh an scéim DEIS oscailte di, bheadh sé sin á fháil di. Dá mbeadh sé sin aici, bheadh sí in ann acmhainní breise a fháil, acmhainní múinteoireachta agus acmhainní breise chun díriú isteach ar fadhbanna bunúsacha san áireamh. Mar a dúirt mé, tá an scoil lonnaithe i gceantar atá ag fás ach is ceantar é ina raibh fadhbanna bunúsacha ann le déanaí de bharr na gcíríbeacha dírithe ar an ionad IPAS in Iarthar na Cathrach. Tá roinnt de na páistí ag teacht ón ionad sin chun dul ar scoil. Tá an scoil seo ag déanamh éacht ag cuidiú leo siúd agus leis na páistí eile sa cheantar. Tugann sí aitheantas don Roinn ó thaobh na scoile nua a bheidh aici an bhliain seo chugainn agus an méid atá faighte aici go dtí seo ach níl an Roinn ag déileáil léi ar chomhchéim le scoileanna eile toisc gur bunaíodh í tar éis an dáta ar dhún an córas DEIS.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I hear what the Deputy is saying. There are specific issues in the school. He can correct me if I am wrong, but I understand many students come from a local IPAS centre. It has challenges that perhaps not every school faces, although a lot of schools around the country, including many in my constituency, face similar challenges. That is one of the reasons the capitation grant increased so significantly this year. It needed to increase. Nonetheless, that has happened.

There has been an increase of approximately 22% in capitation rates for primary schools in the 2026-27 school year. As I said, there has been an increase of nearly 50% in the level of capitation grants paid to primary schools. Regarding the specific school the Deputy mentioned, as I have said, the Department will make contact with it to seek further details in order to

determine what the issues are and what support can be given. There is no record of contact from the school regarding capitation or ancillary funding.

The financial services unit, funded by the Department, is an important source of advice and support to schools on financial matters. It routinely provides support and advice to large numbers of schools each year. As I said, I will pass on the contact details. I will not call them out. The Deputy may well be aware of them. It is important that the school knows the Department stands ready to support in whatever way it can.

### **Urban Development**

**Deputy Emer Currie:** During last year's election campaign, one of the most frequently raised issues on the doors of Dublin West was the vibrancy of our suburban villages. The villages of Clonsilla, Ongar, Castleknock, Blanchardstown, Mulhuddart and Tyrrelstown are more than just residential areas or urban sprawl; they are distinct communities with their own character, identity and history. My constituents want to live in places with thriving and safe main streets, quality public facilities and amenities and a genuine sense of community. The reality on the ground can be one of congestion, homogenous main streets, unutilised or derelict heritage properties or features and, sometimes, retail vacancy and turnover.

Earlier this year, I had some positive engagement with Fingal County Council on this issue. Its town regeneration office is delivering town centre first programmes in several rural Fingal communities which qualify for funding under the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. It uses a toolkit, including a health check, in collaboration with the community, businesses and the council, to set out potential solutions and projects for the village. The town and village renewal scheme, rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, CLÁR or LEADER funding are then used to fund those projects.

Obviously, a rural designation would not apply to villages in Dublin 15. However, following my representations, and recognising the value of the town centre first framework and what it would bring to urban communities, Fingal County Council agreed to step outside the box and proceed with health checks for urban villages, funded from the council's resources, later this year or in 2026. This was to include Castleknock and Blanchardstown villages. I am grateful to the council for taking this step. However, it also has a request for me. Its resources will be limited. The key challenge is that the funding streams for the delivery of projects in rural areas, the town and village renewal scheme, the RRDF, CLÁR, LEADER or funding for gathering more elaborate data and doing research under the town centre first scheme is not available for urban villages, which limits the capacity of the council to deliver transformative or regeneration projects.

We are caught in a funding gap. Our villages are too big for schemes like the town and village renewal scheme, yet too small to qualify for the urban regeneration and development fund. We will be able to diagnose the problems in Blanchardstown and Castleknock, but not necessarily fix them. Suburban villages in my constituency are simply falling through the cracks of the existing funding streams. We need revisions to the town and village renewal scheme and the new towns and cities investment fund or the urban regeneration development fund to enable this much-needed regeneration work across urban communities. It is not just my constituency that would be impacted by this.

I raised this with the Taoiseach previously and he acknowledged the problem. He suggested I speak to the Minister for public expenditure. I am now coming to the Minister of State. There is a systemic funding gap and it requires a clear and practical solution. The solution is simple and we are staring right at it. We need to revise these schemes, especially for those identified for health checks under the town centre first policy.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank Deputy Currie for raising this issue. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary.

The Deputy mentioned the town centre first policy. As she said, it is a major cross-government policy that aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres and provide an integrated policy approach to the development of Irish towns. The town centre first policy supports the vision outlined in Our Rural Future for a thriving rural Ireland. It does this by providing a policy framework, financial support and access to funded capital schemes to facilitate the regeneration of rural Irish towns. This is to help make our rural towns and villages resilient and vibrant places to live, work, invest in and visit.

To this end, the Department's rural development investment programme operates a range of capital schemes that are targeted at rural areas outside of more urban metropolitan locations. These schemes include, for example, the RRDF and the town and village renewal scheme. The town centre first policy was developed in conjunction with the Minister for housing. As such, the policy can and does have application to communities across larger and more urban towns as well as rural settlements. There are dedicated funding schemes, provided by that Department, available to local authorities to support larger and more urban towns, including the urban regeneration and development fund, the vacant property refurbishment grant under the croí conaithe initiative and the THRIVE scheme which revitalises our heritage buildings.

In line with its remit, my Department has supported the development of town centre first plans for Dublin towns like Rush and Lusk, which I note are not on the Deputy's list. A key element of the development of a town plan is the community's own identification of priority projects in that town, something the Deputy mentioned. The capital funding schemes available, such as the town and village renewal scheme, can then assist those communities in delivering on their aspirations, be this through a community centre, public realm works, public park or other community facility.

The town and village renewal scheme was introduced in 2016 and is one of a number of measures designed to rejuvenate rural towns and villages throughout Ireland. Since the launch of the scheme, almost €184 million has been allocated to over 1,800 projects. The scheme targets funding primarily at towns and villages outside of city metropolitan areas with populations of fewer than 10,000 people. However, towns with a population of up to 15,000 may be eligible if a high-quality application is received. I do not know if that refers to the towns Deputy Currie is speaking about. I heard what she said about the funding gap. I am not fully *au fait* with all of this, but I can see how some towns could fall through those cracks. While I know the intent of this programme, I still hear what the Deputy is saying. All I can say is that I will certainly bring this to the attention of the Minister. The Deputy is talking about revising these schemes and looking at where the gaps are. I think that is a reasonable and sensible thing to do, and I will make sure that her query and concern are relayed to the Minister.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** I appreciate that. The Minister of State has made the town and village renewal scheme sound even more attractive with how she described it. However, we are not eligible for it. She also referenced the urban regeneration and development fund. Again, we are too small for those projects. We are, as a suburban area, falling between those gaps. I acknowledge what she said about the THRIVE scheme and the vacant property refurbishment grant. However, it is the description of the town and village renewal scheme that ticks the boxes I am talking about. It can assist those communities in delivering on their aspirations, be that through a community centre, public realm works, a public park, public lighting or other such community facility. It is the ability for a community to define what the issue is and work together to solve it in a collaborative way. What is happening here is the funds and the policies are excellent and already exist. What we are asking for is to make our communities eligible for them in order that we can have the same opportunity for place making. Our villages are just as distinct and have just as much character. It is to build on that and emphasise it and bring out the best in our communities. That is what making these funds available would do.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I will go back for a minute to the town and village renewal scheme. I know Deputy Currie is talking about certain towns or villages being too big and others being too small. I say again that funding has been allocated under the town and village scheme to Fingal County Council to support projects in the county. I mentioned Rush but I can also mention Skerries, St. Margaret's and Donabate. This funding includes funding under the building acquisition measure of 2023 for the purchase of a former parochial house and coach house in St. Margaret's to develop a multipurpose community space. Funding was approved to support the development of the Floraville park in the centre of the town of Skerries. As I said, public realm improvements were funded in Donabate and Rush. I am not sure this is exactly what the Deputy wants to hear, and she will forgive me if I am not-----

**Deputy Emer Currie:** It is not my area.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** Yes, I know, but I can only quote what is in front of me and what is possible. It may not be her area but the idea here, and she is the best judge of this, is that this is possible in similar areas, and it is what might be done. I heard what she has said and I fully understand her frustration. While there is really good intent in all of these projects, a really good push behind them and successes, perhaps in some instances it does not fit the place the Deputy is speaking about. It is too big for some areas and too small for others. All I can promise is that the Minister, Deputy Calleary, will hear clearly what the Deputy has had to say on this issue and her concern about the need to perhaps refocus slightly.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 12.45 a.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 19 Samhain 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 12.45 a.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 19 November 2025.