



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 17 Nollaig 2025

Wednesday, 17 December 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): 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 Michael Cahill - To discuss the tackling of coastal erosion and flooding in County Kerry.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere - To discuss the new Kilkenny Institute of Further Education and Training campus.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss ongoing water outages affecting the community of Knockane, Castlemartyr, County Cork.

Deputy Joe Cooney - To discuss the employment support scheme.

Deputy Barry Heneghan - To discuss urgent issues regarding a school in Fairview.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss school places for special needs pupils at second level in Portlaoise.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the number of members assigned to Garda road policing units.

Deputy Brendan Smith - To discuss rural development policy.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss drug-related intimidation and associated violence.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney - To discuss an additional autism class in Goatstown ETNS.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss prevention of losses of connectivity for persons using a health monitoring or pendant alarm.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the backlog in assessment of need applications in Fingal west.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the CFRAM project at Blackrock, County Louth.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss ongoing human rights abuses against the Uyghurs.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss ongoing issues with the tenant in situ scheme in Dublin North-West.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon - To discuss the dispute involving Caredoc staff.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the deferral of commencement of the Dart+ South West project to 2030.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss community spaces in Dublin 8.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss a proposal by Caltra Community Group for funding under the building blocks grant.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher - To discuss the omission of a school from DEIS.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - To discuss the imminent closure of The Complex in Dublin.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the need for a 24-hour rapid response vehicle at Tuam ambulance base.

Deputy Conor Sheehan - To discuss the 304A bus service in Limerick city and the roll-out of the BusConnects service.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the publication of the north Kerry lookback review.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the tender for the building of Cork Educate Together Secondary School.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the need for funding for a school in Cork due to ongoing leaks.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss plans for investment in water and wastewater infrastructure in Dunboyne, County Meath.

The matters raised by Deputies Michael Cahill, Barry Heneghan, Joe Cooney and Louis O'Hara have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Coastal Erosion

Deputy Michael Cahill: The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, will know that I live by a lovely beach at Rossbeigh in south Kerry. The Minister of State did us the honour of visiting us on his second last trip to Kerry. We are plagued by coastal erosion, storms and damage to our coastline. Since the Minister of State was down with us, we have had a high tide and the public road down by the beach was closed off for a number of days. If we do not get funding

fairly soon the play area, including the playground and the tennis court, will be damaged yet again. I ask that the Minister of State would assist Kerry County Council with funding to strengthen the works there and to carry out additional works. On that same day the Minister of State also visited Cromane, a five-minute drive from Rossbeigh, where he met a number of local families whose homes have been subject to flooding. As I keep saying, there is a big difference between rainwater flooding and seawater flooding. It is a different ball game when you have the Atlantic Ocean inside your home. I have witnessed a number of occasions when there has been 3 ft of salt water inside people's homes. Once a place has been flooded it is absolutely impossible to get insurance again. The people there, the residents of Cromane Lower, are living on edge every time there is a high tide. Where the problem really lies is when it coincides with a storm. Our storms are getting more frequent and urgent action is required. The residents cannot sleep in their beds when there are high tides. I plead with the Minister of State again today to come to the assistance and to the rescue of the residents of Cromane Lower. The same applies to Glosa, which is in Cromane as well. Going back the road from Glenbeigh to Cahersiveen there is Whitestrand Beach over the water from Cahersiveen.

It is subject to continuous erosion. The public toilets are in danger of being washed away. I ask that emergency funding be made available there. Back along the Ring of Kerry road towards Waterville, there is a huge problem with coastal erosion. Submissions have been made regarding Waterville as well. Again, I ask that funding be made available.

Regarding Glenbeigh, just a mile from Rossbeigh beach the Minister of State met with residents of Incheraigh. Their homes were flooded. They spent an absolute fortune over the years. They came up here to see a predecessor of the Minister of State, the current Tánaiste, Simon Harris, when he was Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works. They were pleading for funding and were successful on that occasion. The embankment there was in the charge of the old Land Commission. This is a grey area. Historically, the residents would pay an annual fee to the Land Commission and in return it would carry out emergency protection works. That scheme should be reintroduced because they are in no man's land.

There are other big schemes. I thank the Minister of State for the funding he has announced. He was in Listowel, which is a massive scheme. I congratulate the Office of Public Works and, indeed, Kerry County Council for the tremendous work they did there. There are other schemes in Tralee, Killarney and Kenmare. The Minister of State is very familiar with these, and he is very much on top of his brief, to be fair. I commend him on his interest and on what he is doing. I hope the Government gives him more funding to carry out all these works.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this important matter. I am very familiar with the coastal erosion and flooding issues in County Kerry, having visited twice this year.

Coastal erosion and localised flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for every local authority to investigate and address. Local authorities can undertake these works with their own resources.

In 2009, the Office of Public Works, OPW, introduced the minor flood mitigation works and coastal protection scheme. The purpose of the scheme is to provide 90% funding to local authorities to undertake studies on coastal erosion and minor flood mitigation works within

their administrative areas. This minor works scheme generally applies where a solution can be readily identified and achieved, and the costs do not exceed €750,000. Applications under the scheme are assessed by the OPW having regard to specific economic, technical, social and environmental criteria set out in the scheme. To be approved for funding under the scheme, these benefits from the works must exceed their associated costs.

To date, nationally, the OPW has approved over €70 million for over 900 unique local flood relief and coastal projects that are providing benefits to some 8,000 properties. Since 2009, the OPW has approved some €4.2 million in funding to Kerry County Council for some 40 projects. Some €2.9 million of this approved funding relates to coastal erosion works and studies. Under the minor works scheme, it is the responsibility of the local authority to advance the works, once approved by the OPW. This includes all environmental assessments, planning consents, health and safety requirements and landowner agreements. I recently announced revisions to this minor works scheme, including an increase in the maximum funding under the scheme to €2 million. My office is finalising the details of these revisions, and I expect to announce these details shortly. The OPW is also funding three local authority staff in Kerry County Council - a senior executive engineer, executive engineer and a senior staff member - to manage the delivery of these flood relief schemes.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I was co-opted onto Kerry County Council in January 1990 following the untimely passing of my father. My very first motion was in regard to coastal erosion. That day I referenced Rossbeigh and Cromane. It is ironic that I am speaking all these years later about the same areas. I acknowledge the money that has been spent over the years, but we are talking about now. We are talking about the present and the future. It is like the old saying that a stitch in time saves nine. Again, I am pleading with the Minister of State to allocate the necessary funding to Kerry County Council. We have a proven track record in the quality of the work along with the Minister of State's colleagues in the OPW. I want to emphasise that because I have seen their projects first hand and how good the completed project is.

The businesses in Killorglin town along the River Laune are subject to tidal flooding and they are living in fear as well. It is a huge problem, not just in Kerry but nationally. There is an urgent need for funding to be made available. I ask the Government to make additional funding available to the Minister of State's Department because I know he will spend it, and it will be spent properly. I thank the Minister of State for his work. The top priority in Kerry - this is coming up at every single meeting of Kerry County Council and I have raised it here - is the residents of Cromane. They will have to relocate if they do not get help now. The damage this does is accompanied by fear and anxiety. Paschal Sheehy has covered the flooding in Cromane live on national television. I want to make sure that does not happen again and the only way that will be resolved is by funding being provided for the locations I have mentioned.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I fully appreciate where the Deputy is coming from. When I visited Kerry, I saw this issue at first hand and I spoke to the residents who are badly affected by it. I have set out the changes I have brought about in the minor works scheme to go from €750,000 to €2 million. It is not about the money; it is about the local authorities coming up with a scheme. I encourage the Deputy, as I encouraged other Members yesterday in the House, to go back to his local authority. We are funding staff to the local authorities. We encourage

them to come up with a scheme. It has to be driven by the local authority. It is not driven by the Government or by the OPW. We fund the local authorities. If the local authority comes into my Department with a scheme and it meets the criteria, we will fund it.

I do not want to see people in Kerry or any other part of the country suffering. Since I have taken up this role we are at a maximum. We have never seen the like of it spent before. That is €102 million with regard to flooding. We have 100 schemes at various stages taking place at present. That has never happened. That is the positivity that is happening within the Government but the people that Deputy Cahill represents feel we are not getting to them or reaching out to them. I encourage the Deputy to go back to the local authority. He has seen what we have done in Listowel. We went down. There was an issue and we moved with the local authorities. We saw the results of that when we saw the finished work.

I want to work with Deputy Cahill, I want to work with the local authorities but most of all I want to work with the residents. I appeal to Deputy Cahill to go back to the local authority and sit down with the engineers to see whether a minor works or interim measures project can be done from an engineering point of view for the people the Deputy spoke about so eloquently. I will support them 100%. I do not want people to say that they need extra money but the Government is not delivering. It is not that. I have the money. I have a huge budget for flooding. The Government is very driven because we know what coastal erosion is doing now. Just out the road in Portrane, we have to try to deal with a very delicate situation over the next couple of days. I will work with Deputy Cahill going forward but I ask him to go back to the local authority and see if they can come up with a scheme.

Employment Schemes

Deputy Joe Cooney: I raise a serious matter brought to me by a constituent, a disabled woman who was in receipt of the employment support scheme. This support was fundamental. It enabled her to carry out her role, be productive and build a career on an equal basis with others. On the basis that this support was in place, she made the major decision to progress her career. Like any other employee, she successfully convinced a new employer that she should take on a more senior management role. She did so in good faith with the reasonable expectation that the employment support which enabled her to perform her role would continue with her just as her skills, experience and qualifications did and indeed do for every other worker. She was shocked to discover this support would not transfer with her and would not be available to her new employer. This happened during the probation period where performance, productivity and the ability to carry out core tasks under heightened scrutiny are required. The removal of this support placed her in an impossible position. She now feels being unable to meet productivity expectations, not because of inability or incompetence but because the reasonable support that enabled her to do the job has been withdrawn. In effect, she is being penalised for ambition. Remaining in her previous role would have preserved her support. Her decision to progress her career has resulted in its removal. This places her at a significant disadvantage compared with her non-disabled peers and amounts to discrimination in practice. Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires prohibition of discrimination in all matters concerning employment and obliges states to ensure reasonable accommodation and adopt measures that enable disabled people to enter, remain and progress in employment. The employment support scheme is such a measure. It directly

enables her to work and develop a career on an equal basis with others. Replacing it with a wage subsidy scheme does little or nothing to support career progression at middle or senior management levels where success depends on personal supports for the employee rather wage subsidies to employers. I ask that the removal of this scheme from those who currently avail of it and wish to progress their careers be reviewed in light of the principles of providing reasonable accommodation, expectations, obligations under the employment equality Act, the commitment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the employment pillar of the equality and disability strategy.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Cooney as an ábhar tábhachtach seo a ardú inniu. I thank Deputy Cooney for raising this issue. The employment support scheme was run by FÁS. It offered financial support to employers to cover a disabled employee's employment. The scheme was open to the private sector only. The wage subsidy scheme came into operation as a pilot scheme in September 2005. It replaced the pilot programme for the employment of people with disabilities and the employment support scheme, both of which were closed to applicants at that time. Following a review of its pilot phase, the wage subsidy scheme was placed on a permanent, non-statutory footing in October 2008. Participants in the pilot programme for the employment of people with disabilities became part of the wage subsidy scheme. Any employee in an employment subsidised under the employment support scheme in 2005 when the scheme closed to new applicants was allowed to remain on the scheme but only in that specific employment. If the employment covered by the employment support scheme terminates or changes in the way suggested by Deputy Cooney, the employee cannot transfer their employment support scheme to a new employment but can instead apply for the wage subsidy scheme.

Expenditure on the wage subsidy scheme over the past five years has been €2.95 million. The employment support scheme closed to new applicants in 2005. At that time, there were 474 employees in receipt of payments under the scheme in respect of 404 employers. Currently, there are 36 employees still in receipt of payment with 31 employers. The reduction has been due to changing jobs, retirement or switching to the wage subsidy scheme. Last year, the Department of Social Protection published a review of the wage subsidy scheme following a public consultation. The review made six recommendations. I have allocated an additional €3.7 million to implement the review's recommendations. In April 2024, the minimum hours for the scheme were reduced from 21 to 15 hours. The wage subsidy scheme now includes employers in the community, voluntary and commercial semi-State sector while the employment support scheme was open to private sector only. In budget 2026, we provided for an increase in the subsidy rates paid under the scheme and an expansion in eligibility with regard to those with acquired disabilities. I have also made changes to the supports available to employers to make it more attractive for employers to work with people with disabilities. The employment support scheme is closed to new applications but we are committed to legacy cases and continuing their payment until their employment ends. The programme for Government commits to further reviewing the minimum hours requirement under the wage subsidy scheme for disabled people and to examining further increases to the payment rate. Those commitments are also reflected in the human rights strategy for disabled people to which the Deputy referred. I am happy to discuss this specific case with him offline to see if we can support this person's employer with regard to the wage subsidy scheme and also the workplace adaptation scheme.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I thank the Minister for his update. The maximum rate under the wage subsidy scheme is 50% of the minimum wage. State policy tells employers that disabled people can only work at entry level. We should come at it from the other side and build capacity and value by creating a pathway for those with a disability to progress to the highest levels they can attain which is important for those people. The core issue is that the new wage subsidy scheme is framed in terms of compensating an employer for an employee's perceived lack of ability. That is not empowerment, it is charity. The employment support scheme supports those with a disability to do a job to the fullest and has never been about a defect but about enabling people to contribute on an equal basis with others. The resources it has provided to this woman have allowed her to perform to the highest standard.

This benefits her, her employers, her colleagues and wider society, which is very important for people with disabilities.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. As I outlined, when the employment support scheme closed in 2005, there were 474 employees in respect of 404 employers. Today, we have 1,518 employers availing of the scheme and over 2,500 employees. We are a long way off where I want to be, however, and I will be very focused on getting people with disabilities into the workforce because they have extraordinary skill and talent to offer.

I am constantly reviewing the wage subsidy scheme. In budget 2026, we provided an increase in the base rate of the wage subsidy from €6.30 to €7.50, which is an increase of over 19%. Employers with up to six employees under this scheme will be paid the base rate from next April and employers with between seven and 16 employees are paid €8.50. Employers with 17 employees or more are paid €10 per employee. Employers that employ 25 or more active people with disability are also eligible for a grant of €30,000 towards the employment of an employment assistance officer. As such, we are very much focused on making that scheme work and making it more attractive to employers. I am also very focused on engaging with employers to encourage them to offer opportunities and in doing so highlighting the many companies that are doing that in every role, including management roles, front-facing roles and back office roles, and in using technology to support people to make the most of their talent. We have made changes to the workplace accommodation scheme to do that. I am happy to engage with the Deputy on the wage subsidy scheme, the benefits that are there for his constituent's employer and the supports that are there for them. We will certainly be in contact with him after this again.

Ambulance Service

Ambulance Service

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I have been contacted by constituents who work in the ambulance service locally who asked me to request a rapid response vehicle at Tuam ambulance base. These workers are telling me they are under pressure. They are dealing with a very high volume of calls and they need more cover. The crews in Tuam cover a vast area across north and east Galway and south Mayo. The introduction of a second ambulance on a 24-7 basis in Tuam last year demonstrates the high volume of calls in the area and the need for this vehicle. The figures

I have received show Tuam ambulance base responded to 3,578 calls in 2023, 5,297 calls in 2024 and 3,735 calls between January and August of this year. The local staff have told me they are never at the ambulance base because they are constantly out on calls. This vehicle would be at the base when they are out on calls to provide additional cover around the clock. A rapid response vehicle is not like a typical ambulance. It is a smaller vehicle that can respond more quickly. It would be staffed by an advanced paramedic, which is important and they can offer enhanced care and advanced life support in emergency situations. Having that cover there would ultimately contribute towards saving lives and achieving better outcomes for patients. They could administer various medications to treat different illnesses before a patient arrived at hospital, and time is obviously crucial in a lot of emergency situations.

Tuam ambulance base is equipped to cater for a rapid response vehicle. There are advanced paramedics in the area who can operate it. This would allow them to support paramedic crews in the various ambulance bases across the region and not just Tuam, because Tuam is at the centre of a very wide region where these vehicles are not operating around the clock. It could provide cover in counties Mayo and Roscommon as well. The National Ambulance Service has informed me that provision of such a vehicle would have to be included in the HSE national service plan for it to be considered. There is a very strong case here on the basis of patients safety, ensuring better outcomes for people and ultimately saving lives. I ask the Minister of State to outline whether this is something that will be considered.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, I thank Deputy O'Hara for the opportunity to respond on the topic of a 24-hour NAS rapid response vehicle at Tuam ambulance base. I assure Deputies the Government remains absolutely committed to investing in increasing capacity in our National Ambulance Service. The NAS allocation for 2025 includes €8 million for new service developments to provide up to 180 additional staff. This investment is focused on the provision of additional front-line emergency ambulance capacity, further expansion of NAS alternative care pathways and growing specialist service capacity, including critical care retrieval and aeromedical services. Continuous increases in Government investment in the NAS has raised total NAS staffing at the end of October 2025 to 2,486. This represents an overall growth in staff of 558 or 29% since 2020, of which over 85% are engaged in direct patient care roles.

In response to the specific matter raised by the Deputy, I am aware this matter has been raised by him previously several times. In fairness to the Deputy, I was looking today and he has put in several parliamentary questions on this through 2025, so I can see he is very passionate about it. I know from working with the ambulance paramedics that they excel at what they do and they do great work, so it is important we recognise them here. I am informed by the NAS that while there was no provision to consider this in 2025, the HSE will reconsider development of this service as part of the ongoing HSE national service planning process for 2026. This is what I have been told today. In the meantime, I am aware there are two existing 24-7 RRVs operating out of the Merlin Park base in Galway, as well as from Recess and County Roscommon on a dynamic deployment basis.

The HSE has also advised that it intends to increase capacity its West and North-West region with an additional NAS helicopter emergency medical service, HEMS, to be established in 2026. This will increase HEMS coverage for patients in the west and north-west of the country

and improve access for rural and isolated patients to care. This is about them ultimately. I am also informed an additional 23 paramedics are scheduled to be deployed to the HSE West and North-West region, including in County Galway, this month to provide additional front-line capacity.

As Dail colleagues will be aware, patient demand for NAS services continues to rise year-on-year nationally as well as in the HSE West North-West region, including in Tuam and environs. In 2024 there were nearly 430,000 urgent and emergency calls received from the public. This represents an 8% increase nationally on the previous year and urgent and emergency calls received by the NAS have risen by a further 6% to date this year.

Despite the significant increase in patient demand, overall ambulance response performance has been largely maintained, both on a national basis and for the NAS west and north-west region. Performance in the year to September in the NAS west and north-west region for life-threatening red calls, which constitute over 95% of all emergency calls received, met the 2025 national service plan target of 45%.

I reiterate my sincere gratitude to all NAS staff and all our ambulance services across the country, including in County Galway, for their continued commitment and dedication to patient care.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I welcome the commitment to consider this as part of the service planning process for 2026. I sincerely hope it is implemented. I also want to express my gratitude to the staff of the NAS but if we want to demonstrate our gratitude, we need to consider the level of pressure these crews are under and do everything we can to alleviate that and ensure a better service and better outcomes for patients, which is what it is all about.

I urge the Minister of State and the National Ambulance Service to engage with staff in Tuam around this issue. They know better than anybody what the situation is like on the ground and what could improve it. I raise this issue on their behalf today. Ultimately, this is about better outcomes for people and saving lives. It deserves to be fully considered and I hope it is.

We have had reports carried out into ambulance bases like Loughglynn, County Roscommon, which examined in detail the situation, level of calls and so on. Specific service improvements were implemented after that. That could be considered for Tuam as well, to take an in-depth look at the situation and what improvements could make a difference.

I welcome the Minister of State's comments that this will be examined as part of the process for next year. We will wait and see what comes out of that. I hope it is a positive outcome.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I was looking back through the Deputy's parliamentary questions and, in fairness, he is working with ambulance paramedics on the great work they do. I know the Deputy will be committed to doing this. This will be looked at in 2026. I thank the Deputy for highlighting it. It is important we recognise the work ambulance paramedics do around the country. They do great work. The Government remains committed to investing in increasing capacity in our National Ambulance Service for patients in County Galway and across the country.

In my opening statement, I focused on NAS front-line emergency response activity and developments in the west of the country. I will now reference the NAS's ongoing programme of strategic reform. Supported by sustained Government investment, the NAS is continuing to increase its capabilities and capacity to treat increasing numbers of patients at the most appropriate level of clinical need, including in their homes and communities. The Deputy will be aware it is important we do this. The NAS reform initiatives will better place the service to meet the demands of the rapidly growing and ageing population we have. Funding for new service developments this year will support further expansion and alternative care pathways designed to reduce the number of patients presenting at hospital emergency departments where there is no clinical requirement. In the first six months of 2025, nearly 30,000 patients were treated through the NAS alternative care pathway, with 40% of those patients not subsequently requiring to go into emergency departments. I acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of our workers and the vital service they provide for everybody.

Message from Seanad Éireann

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Seanad Éireann has passed the Finance Bill 2025, without amendment; has passed the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks (Amendment) Bill 2025, without amendment; and has passed the Social Welfare and Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System (Amendment) Bill 2025, without amendment.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 9.45 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 9.45 a.m. and resumed at 10 a.m.

Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Fox Hunting) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

We are here today on an historic occasion. This is the first Bill in Dáil Éireann to specifically outlaw fox hunting. There have been attempts to ban a range of blood sports before. The origins of fox hunting are around the 1400s, when foxes were on farmland and people rounded up a dog to get rid of them. This became a formal sport in the nineteenth century by the British, our colonial rulers, dressed in master attire and all of the trappings of hierarchy. Oscar Wilde's famous phrase, "[T]he unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable", still applies. However, the personnel have changed socially. It is ironic that in 1919 Sinn Féin, for example, the forerunner of the three big parties in the Dáil today, ran a campaign of disruption of fox hunts in protest at the release of prisoners for independence precisely because fox hunting was carried out by the landed gentry. The participants may be different, but it is ironic that the three big parties in the Dáil that profess to be nationalist maintain this when it has been banned in the UK for over 20 years.

There is overwhelming opposition to fox hunting in this country. Let us be very clear on that from the outset. It is not popular in any way whatsoever in all regions and among all ages. We have heard some Ministers banging a rural-urban drum all week. However, a recent poll

found 73% of people are opposed to fox hunting and only 12% expressed any support for it. We will keep hearing that this is a rural versus urban issue, but the statistics say otherwise. In Connacht-Ulster, 72% of people in the poll to which I referred were opposed to fox hunting and in Dublin the figure was 76%. It is virtually the same feeling. The importance of the fox in Irish folklore and history needs to be stated because it has been demonised. It is a native species, important to our biodiversity and plays an important role as a pollinator to spread seeds in our ecosystem.

I want to start with what happens on the fox hunt because we will hear a lot of things. This is about cruelty to animals. The Irish Council Against Bloodsports provides a very good description:

The dogs are sent into an area to scent out a fox and force it to break cover ... the chase begins and can continue for an hour or more. This part of the hunt provides the “field” [the riders] with the excitement they crave as they hurdle fences, ditches and walls in pursuit of the fox. The fox will go anywhere to escape the hounds. He will try to go to earth down a fox-hole, drain or badger sett, but these escapes are likely to have been blocked the night before by hunt supporters. The fox will run among sheep and other livestock, the hounds following in pursuit, resulting in the livestock being scattered and put under stress. If he cannot escape, the fox is chased to exhaustion at which point he will be caught and savaged to death by the hounds. Foxhounds are bred for stamina, not speed, otherwise the fox would be caught too soon and spoil the hunters’ fun. Often a fox will succeed in finding an unblocked refuge. The hunt has several options; they can leave the fox if they are confident of finding others, they can dig him out with shovels, or they can send for the terrierman

Either way, it is a horrific ending for the fox.

I took part in a debate yesterday and the person I debated said a fox is wily and cute, as if it enjoyed this. What I will say comes from people who study animal behaviour, not a TD speaking off the top of her head. For the fox, there is heightened fear, exhaustion and loss of motor control. The Burns inquiry, carried out before fox hunting was banned in England and Wales, found that a fox had severe mental trauma. The other animals involved in this barbaric process, such as horses, also suffer. They are forced to run and jump. This is a prey animal whose first and primary instinct is flight. Hounds are also hidden victims. They can be injured and, as we know, are often dumped and shot by their owners when they are no longer of use.

Why is this barbarism maintained? The argument from one party, namely Sinn Féin, was that it would go underground and we need to regulate it. It is practically underground anyway because there is evidence of criminal adjacent behaviour. As those who attended the briefing we had last week will know, foxes are often put in a sack when caught and brought to dogfights according to wildlife rescuers who have found foxes consistent with those sorts of injuries. In a survey carried out by *thejournal.ie*, it was found that foxes sell for about €100 and there are about 4,500 members of illegal hunt clubs. There is money in this. As with everything, that is what is keeping it going. There is tourism in fox hunting because it has been banned in the UK. There is money in hunts for those who organise them. Again, I do not have time to go into all of that.

I want to deal very quickly with some of the issues relating to foxes and farming. As I said, they keep down the number of rodents, which is important for arable farming. Rabbits can cost

arable farmers a lot of money. The fox is portrayed as a threat to sheep and livestock. The biggest threats to lambs are weather, starvation and disease. They are the leading causes of lamb mortality. Only 1% of lambs are estimated to be lost to foxes. In areas of hill farming the figure may be slightly higher. Let us have grants to help hill farmers deal with that. Good husbandry and fencing are the way around this. We keep hearing that we need to keep down fox numbers. If a cull is needed, it is up to the Department of agriculture to organise that; it will not be a wild west situation of leaving it to individual fox hunts.

We keep hearing about the equine industry. A UCD report found that less than 5% of our equine sector is reliant on hunting. There is huge potential to expand the equine sector. Loads of working class kids and ordinary people cannot access horses because it is still an elitist sector, such as trekking and so on.

Last week, there was a bill in the Dáil on dog welfare. I know the names of all TDs with dogs at this point because we heard from Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael about how they love their dogs. A fox is a dog - madra rua. It is a wild dog. Why is a wild dog of less importance? If Deputies vote against my Bill, why are they okay with wild dogs being hounded like this? Domestic dogs kill sheep and bite children. Some of them kill humans, yet we do not advocate that they be hunted down. The Irish Wildlife Trust and the National Society For the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, NSPCA, have answered a lot of these arguments and fully back the Bill.

I want to mention some of the myths that rural people love fox hunting. Nothing could be further from the truth. Again, due to time I will not read out all of the correspondence I have received. Many people have contacted my office regarding this issue. They described how people arrogantly come onto their property, trespass on their lands and terrorise them. Agnes, who lives in Kildare and contacted my office, also spoke to the *Irish Independent*. Her sister is profoundly disabled and hounds invaded their garden. The two women were traumatised listening to hounds savage a fox. They tried to drown out the shrill cries from the fox by playing very loud music in the house. The woman could not eat for about a week afterwards. Does the Minister think that is okay? Deputies will stand up and tell us that this is a pursuit and part of tradition for rural people. Rural people do not love fox hunting. It is a minority participation, 2% according to the most recent poll.

Some people are suddenly concerned about wildlife, such as ground birds.

Of course, a fox will go after a pheasant or a ground bird; that is a natural instinct. The reason ground birds are under threat is development, habitat destruction and all of the issues of modernisation and urbanisation.

I will also mention a fact that is not stated, which is the research showing the link between cruelty to animals and cruelty to humans. If the Government allows this type of barbarism, people become inured to inflicting harm on others. For example, in school shootings in the US, some 43% of the shooters had abused animals. There are many more examples. In 2017, 89% of women who had companion animals and were in an abusive relationship reported that the abuser had abused the animals as well. It is a well known fact that if someone abuses animals he or she is inured to abusing humans.

I do not have time to talk about the Whip system now but I will when summing up. It is absolutely outrageous that this is being used to prevent the popular will.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy Coppinger for bringing forward this important legislation today, which I and the Green Party will be strongly supporting. Along with the Bill on dog breeding last week, it is a welcome opportunity for this House to focus on some of the more extreme and, frankly, indefensible practices which animals in this country are subject to. I want to speak very directly about this. There is simply no justifiable reason for this State to permit the hunting and killing of foxes, with dogs. It is not a reasonable method to control the fox population. It is not, as some have argued, a means of protecting biodiversity, and it is not an intrinsic part of rural life in Ireland.

In spite of the immovable political positions adopted by some of the largest parties in this House, it is absolutely not something that is supported by the majority of people in Ireland, in either rural or urban Ireland. Last week, speaking on Deputy Whitmore's Bill on puppy farming I made the same point. People in every part of our country, when they hear about how animals can be treated legally in this country, are overwhelmingly in favour of eliminating and banning these most heinous and most cruel practices. We are left wondering, why those parties that claim to have the broadest support seem to be so entrenched and so immovable, when even their own constituents are asking for change.

I have little doubt that during the course of the debate this morning, some of those opposing Deputy Coppinger's Bill will try to reduce this to another front in the culture wars. As I said last week, when anyone tries to do something on the issue of animal welfare, the battle is immense. Those of us who are advocating for change are accused of trying to destroy country life, of being out of touch and of being elite. Let me be very clear about what I say so others cannot misrepresent me. I believe it is wrong to kill animals for fun, for pleasure, and that is what fox hunting ultimately is about. It is the killing of an animal in a social setting for human enjoyment. I recognise farmers have to take measures to protect sheep and poultry. Sometimes foxes will be shot. It is not something I might like personally but I recognise it is a reality of farming in our country. However, that is not what we are discussing today. We are discussing the organised pursuit and killing, by mauling to death by dogs, of a small animal for the enjoyment of a group of people who see this as a social event. In the same way Irish law has outlawed the killing of dogs in dog fighting for fun, or the baiting of bulls, bears and badgers for fun over its history, I believe it is now important for us to take that step to ban the killing of foxes for fun.

I would like to raise one slight point of difference with Deputy Coppinger on the Bill. Her Bill seeks to outlaw drag hunting and she rightfully points out that in England, drag hunting---

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Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It does not; it bans trail hunting.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: It bans trail hunting. Okay, I will step back from that point because I think it is important there is at least one drag hunt in Ireland. It is not my thing but as long as a fox is not being killed I am not particularly concerned about that.

It is important we keep the focus here on the central issue which is using legislation to ban the killing of foxes - the killing of animals for pleasure. We have had the opportunity on three occasions in this House over the past five weeks to discuss issues of animal welfare. They

were issues to do with greyhounds and dog breeding and today it is fox hunting. Deputy Coppinger has already pointed out that during the debate on the puppy farming Bill last week, there was real passion among Deputies. Deputies spoke with real meaning about what their dogs and their pets meant to them. Today, we have another opportunity to make real change. We have another opportunity to outlaw a practice that is long past the time of needing to be outlawed in this country. Ireland's laws have banned cruel practices of killing animals in the past in a range of areas and it is time we took this opportunity today. I urge Deputies to support this legislation.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome and support this Bill. I thank Deputy Coppinger for bringing it forward. The supporters of fox hunting like to present this issue as a rural versus urban one. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. This issue actually unites urban and rural communities. Every poll and survey shows a significant majority of the public, both urban and rural, are opposed to fox hunting and want a ban to be introduced.

I live in the countryside in a small townland called Scrothea West in the foothills of the Comeragh mountains, just on the edge of Clonmel. I was born there in a house that had no running water and no flush toilet. We had: five acres; two cows for milking; a couple of calves; two pigs; a flock of hens for eggs; a flock of turkeys for the Christmas market; a small orchard with apples, gooseberry bushes and blackcurrant bushes for apple tarts and jam; and a kitchen garden for potatoes and vegetables. It could not be much more rural than that. I trekked across the Comeragh and Knockmealdown mountains since childhood, spending many a summer's day with the local postman, the late George Conway. During that time, I learned to love and respect animals in their natural environments.

My late uncle was a small farmer. One of my siblings is a small farmer. I do not claim to be an expert on rural affairs but I do know a little bit about them. Farmers I talk to hate to see the hunt arrive because these people - wealthy elites on horseback - think they have a God given right to trespass on farmer's lands, to leave gates open, to break fences, to damage crops and to scatter livestock. By the way, there is not a single item in this Bill that prevents a farmer from protecting his or her livestock. Fox hunting is a barbaric activity and animal cruelty by wealthy, well heeled elites on horseback is a bridge too far. This Bill is a reasonable, common sense and humane one and I believe it should be supported.

Last Friday we all received a glossy brochure in our pigeon holes. They were a clear indication of the wealth and power that is behind the fox hunting lobby. By the way, the water diviner with the hazel stick on the front of this brochure is surely a colleague of the man who divined my water supply over 50 years ago. The other thing that jumps out of this glossy brochure is that, apparently, Tony Blair regrets bringing in a ban on fox hunting. I will tell the Minister that I will take no lectures from Tony Blair - a British imperialist war monger who is responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians, men women and children. I have not heard him regret that. I have not heard him regret the British genocide in Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s, called an Gorta Mór - the Famine. I have not heard him regret the burning to the ground of Cork city 100 years ago by the Black and Tans.

I have not heard him regret the deaths of ten hunger strikers in the Six Counties in 1981.

The public, as usual, are way ahead of the politicians on this issue. They support a ban on fox hunting and I call on all the political parties to allow a free vote for their Members this

evening. It is outrageous that the Whip should be applied on this issue. I again call on all parties to allow a free vote on this issue tonight and pass this humane and reasonable piece of legislation.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on this proposal from Deputy Coppinger. I wish to state clearly at the outset that I and my Department take the matter of animal welfare most seriously. My Department devotes considerable resources to protect the well-being of animals and deal with breaches of animal welfare legislation when they occur. The Government is fully committed to promoting good practices that respect the welfare of all animals. On behalf of the Government, I am putting forward our stance to oppose the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Fox Hunting) Bill 2025, the reasons for which I will outline in my address this morning. The Government fully recognises the emotive nature of this policy area, which has been the subject of debate over many years. The Bill, as set out by Deputy Coppinger, proposes to amend section 12 of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 which currently provides an exemption for the lawful hunting of an animal. Deputies will be aware that section 12 of the Animal Health and Welfare Act was fully discussed and approved by the Oireachtas previously.

It is important to note that hunting in Ireland today is not unregulated. Rather, it operates under clear codes of conduct, licensing, welfare standards and full insurance requirements. In accordance with section 25 of the Animal Health and Welfare Act, codes of conduct have been adopted by the members of the Hunting Association of Ireland that detail the conduct to be adhered to in respect of the hunting of foxes and treatment of animals during the hunt. The codes also take into account local concerns and the concerns of landowners on whose land hunting takes place.

Foxes are not a protected species under the wildlife Acts in Ireland and it is legal to hunt foxes under the legislation. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne, has no plans to change the legislation with regard to foxes at this time. Where a specific case of animal neglect or cruelty is identified, offences may be prosecuted under the Act. There are strict penalties that apply for offences under section 12 of this Act. On summary conviction, offences are liable to a class A fine to a maximum of €5,000, imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months, or both. On conviction of indictment, offences are liable to a fine not exceeding €250,000, imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years, or both.

In addition to these existing legislative protections, it is important to frame the context of today's debate beyond that of a binary choice between being with us or against us. To do so is deeply cynical and exploitative and it allows the serious issue of animal welfare to be used as a Trojan horse for a more divisive agenda. I have heard Deputies in this House who support a ban say they have never met anyone who has been on a hunt or, indeed, seen a hunt themselves. I find it incredible that this is used as a selling point to advocate for a ban. There has been no attempt to engage with the very community and cohort of people who would be most affected by such a move or effort to understand the opposite point of view. Decisions could be made today that fundamentally change people's lives and that of their communities and those making that decision remain entirely oblivious of the consequences by virtue of the fact that the activity is invisible to them.

I recognise that this is a deeply emotive issue, one which people on both sides of the argument feel passionately about. Fox hunting represents a long-held tradition and is a part of a way of life for those involved. While it is not an activity the vast majority of people engage in, it means an awful lot to the people who do. People employed by hunting associations or who work in the kennels and care for the dogs and horses have woken up this morning not knowing whether there is a future for their job or animals when they go to bed tonight. It is entirely disproportionate to try to make criminals of these people overnight for engaging in an activity that, in many cases, stretches back generations.

Beyond those directly affected, we must also be conscious of the wider negative impacts this could have for the farriers and vets who benefit from their business, the feed suppliers who rely on their custom, the farmers who avail of the fallen animal collection service they provide, which is most important, the local hospitality in places where commerce can be quiet, especially during the winter season and, indeed, the wider Irish equine sector too as we close down pathways for young riders passionate about horses, undermine the same associations that run our point-to-point races so successfully and lose important jobs and economic activity in rural areas where there are fewer alternatives.

I also wish to reference the legislation itself. The Bill, as it is formed and worded, proposes to ban all hunting for foxes, regardless of the purpose and manner in which that hunting is carried out. It also proposes a ban on trail hunting. Deputy Roderic O'Gorman made the point that he accepts farmers need to shoot foxes on occasion as a control mechanism but, under this Bill, that activity would be illegal into the future. Deputy Healy touched on that as well. I gather from what he said that his understanding is that this normal activity could still happen.

Deputy Seamus Healy: That is nonsense.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Under this Bill, however, that activity would not be permissible at all. As such, this Bill would ban the hunting of foxes with hounds, trail hunting with hounds and the shooting of foxes for pest control, which is carried out to protect livestock and forms an important source of foxes for disease surveillance purposes.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It does not mention shooting.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Ireland is officially free of the zoonotic tapeworm *echinococcus multilocularis*. This is a severe tapeworm that causes debilitating diseases in humans. Annual surveillance in shot foxes provides evidence to prove the absence of the disease in Ireland, which allows us to require that all dogs entering the country are given preventative treatment prior to their arrival here, thus protecting public health as well as domestic pets and wildlife. This work would not be possible under the legislation as it is proposed before the House today.

In respect of the pest control point, while attempts have been made to downplay this, the reality is that foxes prey on livestock and other wildlife such as rare ground-nesting birds, which is something Deputy Coppinger admitted to in her opening address. I have not seen many accounts online seeking to play on people's emotions posting photos of dead lambs or hens that have been attacked by foxes. We all know that anyone who has backyard hens generally always has a story about the night the fox came. Research shows that red foxes are

widespread across Ireland and can be found in every county. The nature of Ireland's wildly-farmed, fragmented landscape and the absence of an apex predator means it lends itself to high fox densities. Indeed, Deputy Coppinger listed many of the animals of which the fox is a predator in her opening address and acknowledged that the fox does not have a natural predator. Hunting provides one of the necessary means of controlling the fox population in Ireland. Deputy Coppinger and People Before Profit are pursuing this as a wedge issue, specifically designed to be emotive and confrontational. If they were honest, this is only a starting point for them. I have no doubt there are many other rural activities they would also like to ban.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What is the Minister talking about?

Deputy Martin Heydon: If they get their way today, it will not stop there. Before long, People Before Profit would have us back here debating legislation no doubt to ban fishing-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: Would the Minister stop?

Deputy Martin Heydon: -----because of the impact it would have on the worm and mayfly.

The profile of animal welfare has never been higher and the prominence it receives in national, regional and social media reflects the seriousness with which this issue is treated by stakeholders, welfare groups, the public and this Government. On 19 November, I launched the six-week public consultation that will run to early January 2026 inviting views to inform the development of a new animal welfare strategy for the period 2026-2030. I encourage all interested stakeholders to provide feedback and comments and make recommendations around the direction, themes and thrust of the new animal health and welfare strategy. To legislate in isolation rather than on the basis of consultation and evidence risks unintended consequences and laws that do not work in practice.

I will touch on one last point, which has been raised in earlier contributions and will no doubt continue to be raised, that is, a potential urban-rural divide. I absolutely agree with the previous contributors who said this is not and should not be about an urban-rural divide. I do not believe it is, either. This Bill can be much better divided along the lines of those who believe we can achieve so much more when we work to understand each other's perspectives and those who believe having the loudest voice in the room gives them the right to dictate how everyone else should live their lives. That is an important point that I hope is reflected in this debate today. I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for the opportunity to speak on this Bill.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister is defending the indefensible and he knows it.

He is defending cruel, barbaric practices. He is defending the organised killing for human entertainment of a tiny minority of foxes. Then, he tries to do it in such a way as to suggest that it should not be divided along urban and rural lines, having two minutes previously said that this is a "wedge issue" that is "designed to be emotive and confrontational", and that there are many other rural activities we would like to ban. On the one hand, the Minister said we should not be pitching it as urban and rural, and we agree, but on the other hand, he was doing precisely that.

The Minister said we are presenting this as a binary issue. He was not clear on what non-binary way he wants to present it. Some of us are opposed to fox hunting. We are opposed to this cruel, barbaric practice. We think it must go the way of dog fighting. I do not know if the Minister had a problem with the banning of dog fighting. We are opposed to badger baiting. It should be banned immediately. Others do not agree with that. The Minister thinks that this should continue. That is a binary issue. I am sorry if that offends the Minister in some way.

The Minister did not say "rural pursuits" and instead went for "rural activities" because, of course, it brings us back to the presidential election. Fox hunting played an unexpectedly outsized role in the campaign as an illustration of how incredibly out of touch Heather Humphreys was, with her continued invocation of rural pursuits and her enthusiastic support for fox hunting, not shared by the vast majority of the public. In the end, the anti-fox hunting candidate won and the pro-fox hunting candidate lost, and it was a strong illustration for people that this person was wildly out of touch. Therefore, it is deeply ironic that we are going to have a vote tonight in the Dáil, where it seems the three big parties are going to continue to be out of touch, not take the lesson of that presidential election and vote to allow this cruel practice to continue.

Regarding the other arguments the Minister made, the only way he can defend the indefensible is with misinformation and a divisive approach. There was the suggestion that this is about pest control. First, to be clear, it is misinformation to say that our Bill bans the shooting of foxes. Of course, it does not.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It refers to all hunting - all.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It explicitly does not. It is hunting - fox hunting. If the Minister has a problem with the-----

Deputy Martin Heydon: The word "all" is there.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is about fox hunting. That is what the Bill is about. People can go and read it online.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is not misinformation.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If the Minister had a problem, he could come back and sum up by saying, "We agree with a ban on fox hunting, but we have a problem with some of the wording and the way it is done". That is no problem. What would happen is it would be passed on Second Stage and amended on Committee Stage.

The point on the ban on trail hunting is there precisely because this has been used in Britain as a way of continuing undercover or underground fox hunting. However, no ban is specified and we support the possibility of the continuation of drag hunting.

Let us be real about the argument on pest control. Saoirse McHugh makes a very good point in the newspaper today: "I don't think anybody believes that getting a pack of 50 dogs and 50 people on horseback to chase a single fox to exhaustion is a reasonable or efficient form of pest

control.” Foxes are no threat to anyone or anyone's livelihood. They are beautiful, intelligent animals that play a vital role in our ecosystem. Tearing them limb from limb is not a sport. It is not an ancient Irish tradition. It is not a rural pursuit. It is an alien bloodlust, imported into this country by a colonial aristocracy. The Irish Masters of Foxhounds Association was established in 1845 during the Famine, as Deputy Healy noted. While ordinary people were starving to death, there were aristocrats in red coats riding around on horseback, torturing animals to death. That is what this tradition is about.

I have to put it to those in Sinn Féin. What are they thinking? What are they thinking about supporting this colonial practice? If they do not come to their senses, if they do not change their party's position on this, I hope at the very least that they will allow a free vote. Surely they know that this is going to be done away with. In 20 years' time, we are not going to have the continuation of fox hunting in this country. Surely a majority of the Sinn Féin membership supports a ban on fox hunting. I know that those I worked with in the presidential campaign were laughing at Heather Humphreys, her support of rural pursuits and her defence of fox hunting, and they were supporting Catherine Connolly's opposition to it. Surely some of them will break with the party Whip and vote with the people, who, urban or rural, are overwhelmingly opposed to fox hunting.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I must make the point that we should not be referring to people who are not in the House and cannot defend themselves. I have been asked to pass that on.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is hard to talk in the Dáil without referring to people who are not here.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I am only passing on the rules of the House. We should not be referring to people outside. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Deputy Coppinger for bringing the Bill forward. I am very happy to support it.

I love sport. I am passionate about sport but I find it had to hard to understand how anybody could gain entertainment from a large group of people on horseback, with a pack of dogs, pursuing a frightened animal, and then watching and celebrating as that frightened animal is torn to pieces by dogs. That is not a sport. That is just an exercise in cruelty and barbarism.

As has been said, this is not an ancient Irish rural tradition. It is a colonial pursuit that was developed by the British nobility. As for the point about the contrast between the enforced starvation of the Irish people during the Famine and the expansion of so-called rural pursuits by the British nobility, there is a connection. Of course, the genocide of the Irish people during what is known as the Famine was linked to an ambition by our colonial masters to drive the people off the land and clear the land. It was an exaggerated version of the enclosure movement, where the rich wanted to drive ordinary people off the land and clear it for their so-called pursuits.

It is ironic, in a way, that those who defend this practice, although it is interesting that the Minister does not actually defend the practice-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He did not defend it at all.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I did.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He did not. What he did was try to misrepresent the Bill. That is what he did.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I defended it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He said there were things in the Bill that are not in the Bill, and then he implied that, really, this was part of a wider agenda of opposing rural pursuits, which it absolutely is not. However, the Minister did not actually defend it. He did not defend it because he knows it is indefensible. It is utterly indefensible. Please tell me how it is a legitimate form of the sport to tear a frightened animal limb from limb with a pack of dogs and a big gang of people on horseback. It is nothing of the sort.

As for the idea that it has anything to do with pest control, seriously, it has to be the most inefficient form of pest control possibly imaginable - you get a gang of horses, dogs and all the associated things to chase one fox. The Minister is seriously putting that forward as a form of pest control. It has nothing to do with that. It was a sport of the nobility - a sadistic sport of the nobility. It is barbaric and uncivilised. How the Minister could possibly defend it is beyond me.

The irony, as has already been said, is that our colonial masters, the British, who developed this, have actually banned it themselves. For some bizarre reason, however, a small group of unrepresentative people, who do not represent the majority opinion in this country, have decided to try to defend this colonial elite practice. It is bizarre. I think the Minister should step back from this and reflect the views of the majority of the people in this country to end this barbaric practice.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the proposers of the Bill for bringing it before the House. It is important to debate all these issues, even the issues that separate and divide us. Every year at the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis we have an opportunity to discuss various motions and set out our party policy. That is where our position on this comes from. For many years we have had motions before Ard-Fheiseanna where it has been discussed. What normally happens is that various cumainn around the country discuss the motions in advance and have their debates. We then debate it at the Ard-Fheis and have a vote on it, and that sets our position. That is why we have the position we have in respect of this.

When it comes to debate, of course there are different views from different people but at the same time we recognise that across the length and breadth of Ireland there are thousands of gun clubs in practically every parish in the country. The people involved in those are hunting and also involved in conservation and everything to do with the countryside, a tradition which sometimes goes back for many generations. Fox hunting on horseback is a tiny part of that.

For most of them, the elite and landed gentry are a thing of the past. The people who are involved in that now are not of that vein. Certainly, that is my experience in my part of the country.

Of course, we also recognise that there has to be strict regulation. Cruelty should not happen and should be stamped out at every opportunity. In my experience those involved in these activities do not go out with cruel intent. They go out mainly because of the satisfaction they get from being involved in the hunt. Often no horses are involved and they are on foot during the hunt. In many cases people engage in this because it is something they have done for generations in some cases. We accept that people have a genuine fear that if we start at one place and ban fox hunting, it will lead to something else and something else. That fear has been expressed by many people, particularly those involved in gun clubs around the country. Whether it is real or not, it is a fear they have and we have to recognise and acknowledge that as well.

Many of us see the fox as a predator which is dangerous certainly for sheep and ground-nesting birds. Many of the people involved in the gun clubs are also involved in other conservation work. They often raise pheasants and let them out along with hen harriers and other ground-nesting birds as well. Of course, the fox is one of the serious predators in respect of that. Many of our farmers are asked not to mow their meadows to allow ground-nesting birds, particularly rare birds, to be able to evolve and develop, and to get them back into the countryside again where they are very much an endangered species. The fox is one of the key predators in respect of that, as are the pine marten and the mink, one of which is a protected species and another an invasive one. Work has to be done to get rid of them. It is the same thing with the fox.

Many foxes are killed not at hunts but actually through lamping where a light is shone on foxes when they are out in the field. They stand and look back and have no sporting chance. It is a way in which there has to be control of an animal which may be beautiful to see but has a very dangerous element to it particularly when it comes to ground-nesting birds but also farm animals such as poultry and sheep out on the mountains.

Of course, we have a decision to make on this and Sinn Féin has a position. That position comes from our Ard-Fheis where this is debated, discussed and set out. If that position changes in the future, it will change in the future. I do not see that happening because I see a groundswell of support from the vast majority of people around the country who recognise that this is something that has been there for a very long time. It is presented sometimes as being elitist, but that has not been the experience of most people. The majority of the Sinn Féin membership have voted on this and have made it very clear that they want to see this continued in a way that protects the environment, protects the animals and has at least a clear element of wildlife protection in respect of it. Hunting the fox is part of protecting other wildlife species. That is the piece that is missing for some people who do not understand fully.

I thank the proposers of the Bill. We will not be supporting it. That is our position and we have a clear logic as to why that is our position.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Every politician has days when their personal beliefs collide with their obligations as a party member and today is one of those days for me. It is no secret that I want to change my party policy on fox hunting; that is on the record. However, as a member

of a political movement, I am not a solo act. Grandstanding over an issue I feel very strongly about might feel righteous for a day, but it weakens us in the struggles that change and improve the lives of our constituents. Let us be clear: fox hunting is abhorrent, cruel, savage and barbaric with no regard for animal welfare. I genuinely do not know why it is called a sport. Calling it a sport implies that both sides have a chance, but if the fox escapes the hunt and gets back to its den, the bloodthirsty redcoats send their hounds in to invade the fox's home, its den, dig it out and tear it apart. There is nothing sporting about that. Most people, urban and rural, do not think that is sport and there are lots of rural pursuits that go on. Jesus, I do not want to hear that phrase again; it is too much for me.

Some 72% of people support a ban on fox hunting which rises to 75% in working-class areas, our base. However, today I am bound by the Whip, not because I think that banning fox hunting does not matter but because I believe in something bigger than myself. I believe in collective struggle, social justice, equality and a united Ireland. Sinn Féin is a democratic grassroots party and our policy is decided at our Ard Fheis. I have tried to change that party policy several times and I will try again. Sinn Féin does not do free votes. We believe in real solidarity and we walk the hard road together.

Before addressing the Bill, I want to speak up for our native Irish foxes. Foxes are not a significant threat to vulnerable livestock and free-range poultry. Domestic dogs - our family pets that were all named during last week's debate - and the hounds used in live hunts are a much bigger threat. Foxes play a really positive role in biodiversity and the ecosystem. The Minister talked about pest control and the fox is a natural pest controller of rats, mice and rabbit populations, and an ally to arable farming.

In urban and rural areas, they are the animal kingdom's equivalent to the Tidy Towns, eating dead and decaying birds and roadkill. Urban foxes also play a good part in cleaning up waste outside junk food outlets. However, foxes no longer have a natural predator and are a threat to ground-nesting birds, such as the curlew and the partridge. Having a humane regulated cull for the purposes of conservation is very different from blood sports.

I acknowledge the intention behind the Bill and an Teachta Coppinger's animal welfare credentials, which I share. However, the Bill is sorely lacking in practical detail. It appears to ban all fox hunting without clearly defining what kind of hunting it refers to. To be fair, section 2(c) does indicate that trapping and snaring the foxes would be prohibited but is silent on key issues. The Bill does not mention the legitimate humane killing of diseased or injured foxes, for instance. The Bill does not mention poisoning, which is a far more cruel form of killing an animal, resulting in the slow and painful death of the poor fox. There is no clarity on whether farmers could shoot a fox if they come upon it actively attacking wildlife or free-range poultry. The Bill does not even mention banning hunting on horseback with hounds by the tally-ho people who come over here from England ever since fox hunting was banned in Scotland, Wales and England, not to mention our own homegrown hooray Henrys.

Also including trail hunting complicates the Bill unnecessarily. It is completely superfluous and not central to the real issue. I accept that hounds on a trail hunt can get scent of a live fox and give chase, but so too can dogs that are out for a walk with their owners or dogs out walking the land with a farmer. The central issue with fox hunting is the cruelty of the chase and the killing of the fox using a pack of hounds. That is the core concern and everything else is political theatre. I am sure we have all seen the emails about mission creep, the slippery slope

and the thin end of the wedge. Some people seem to think we will be coming for their fishing rods next. I notice that the Minister, Martin Heydon, tried to add to that scaremongering; his slip is showing.

Let me reassure people that this is not a conspiracy. My focus is on cruel bloodsports. I am not after anybody and indeed I had a friend who used to shoot rabbits and eat them because he could not live on the amount of money he receives in social welfare from the Government.

I do not have a problem with that. I am not a vegan, I am not a vegetarian, and I am not a hypocrite.

Another odd thing is that people keep sending me social media posts directed at Sinn Féin, some of which target me and other Sinn Féin TDs personally. I appreciate engagement, even spirited engagement, but this odd level of focus on Sinn Féin highlights a wider issue. If it were really about getting this Bill passed, the focus would be on where the power lies, namely with the Government, with its overwhelming majority. It is the Government that decides whether legislation is passed or blocked. I do not need other parties to be my social conscience. It is a regrettable tactic for any Opposition party on the left to direct more fire at another rather than at the conservative forces that actually block change. It speaks to something else. It reflects divisive politics about personal purity before progress. The right must love it, because that is how it keeps winning.

Deputy Ged Nash: Where is this going?

Deputy Réada Cronin: It strengthens the status quo and existing power structures. Sinn Féin will continue to confront the system itself while acting collectively as a credible alternative government, but not by attacking other parties of the left.

My duty as a Sinn Féin TD is to our local communities, who need us to act as a team to provide an alternative government to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Yes, I disagree with my party policy on this issue. I have said it loud and clear. My party does not expect me to pretend otherwise. I did not join Sinn Féin to rid Ireland of blood sports. Yes, I would love that to be a little benefit on the side, but the principal reason I joined Sinn Féin was to play a part in uniting my country. Item one on my agenda is unity, not to split. I promise my constituents who detest fox hunting as much as I do that this is not over. I will work within my party to banish this relic of British colonialism affecting our native wildlife. To Sinn Féin members and supporters, the vast majority of whom oppose blood sports, I say that we will change things by organising. We will not win by walking away. We will act collectively because we know division is the gift that the right does not even need to ask for in a political system designed to divide us.

It is easy to have solidarity in your party name; it takes a bit more solidarity to actually have solidarity in your politics. When we succeed in changing our party policy on fox hunting, we will bring forward a carefully drafted Bill, a Bill that will protect our beautiful, intelligent native Irish fox, ár maidrín rua, ár sionnach álainn.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will be voting against this Bill, in line with Sinn Féin policy. I have heard the calls for a free vote but I remind people that Sinn Féin is a member-led, activist-based

party. Our positions are determined democratically by our members at our Ard-Fheis. I suspect that if this were a different issue, or if Sinn Féin had a different position, those calling for a free vote now would take a very different view. As has been said, this issue has come up at successive Sinn Féin Ard-Fheiseanna and has been debated at length, often robustly. On each occasion, our members have reached the same conclusion, that rural activities involving animals should be strongly regulated rather than banned outright, and that effective regulation requires serious, constructive engagement with all stakeholders, including animal welfare organisations and those involved in these activities. That is a policy that I support. I do so without any personal or vested interest. I am not a hunter or horse owner. I have never attended a fox hunt and I have no intention of doing so.

The manner in which this debate is conducted matters. The vilification of people who engage in the activities in question or who oppose this Bill is the wrong approach. It does not encourage understanding or debate. In fact, it shuts it down and ignores the reality. It is a reality that many people, particularly in rural communities, feel increasingly alienated by the tone of this discussion. From an animal welfare perspective, I believe the approach is absolutely counterproductive. From a wider political and social perspective, it is damaging.

Those of us in this House who are serious about building a progressive-left republican alternative in this country must also be serious about unity, common citizenship, mutual respect, and shared ownership and stewardship of our land. That requires building solidarity between rural and urban working people, not driving wedges between them. We have seen internationally what happens when rural working-class communities feel dismissed or talked down to. They disengage and retreat. That does not serve animal welfare, social justice or progressive politics.

The suggestion that anyone voting against this Bill is simply pandering to a wealthy, powerful colonial lobby is fanciful. I have been lobbied on this issue by people on each side of the debate. I have engaged with many animal welfare advocates who are passionate and want Sinn Féin to support this Bill. The people I engaged with were sincere, informed and respectful, and I respect that. I am happy to and will continue to engage with them.

I was contacted by many people from my constituency, which is also that of the Chair. These were ordinary, hard-working men and women – people involved in farming, game clubs and local community organisations – and they certainly were not wealthy or powerful. In fact, and this is sometimes lost in this debate, most of them are not involved in fox hunting at all. What they have expressed is a broader concern that we cannot dismiss. If we do, we do so at our peril. Their concern is that this debate is part of a wider pattern in which rural life is increasingly viewed with suspicion or hostility. They see opposition not just to hunting but also to other rural pursuits, and in this regard they refer to farming, one-off housing and the social fabric of their communities. Whether Members agree with that assessment or not, it cannot be ignored.

Sinn Féin is a party of working people, urban and rural alike. We engage with concerns from those communities respectfully and honestly. We cannot build a fairer or united Ireland without the working people of rural communities, just as we cannot do so without the working people of urban communities. We will not earn the trust of people unless we are willing to listen and recognise the legitimacy of different lived experiences. Yes, there are people who are very passionate on both sides of this debate. There are also people asking why, in the week

before Christmas, at a time of severe and unrelenting pressure from the cost-of-living crisis and a housing crisis out of control, we are dealing with such a divisive issue in this way. Putting that aside, I agree we have to be open to debate on this issue. I am open to discussion and willing to listen to those who disagree with me profoundly. I ask proponents of this Bill to do the same and to listen to people who speak about rural tradition, wildlife management and the social and economic role of hunting in their communities. This is linked to national hunt racing, and also to the wider sense of alienation felt across rural communities.

It may well be the case that it is possible to secure a ban without any of the engagement I refer to, but that would not be the best approach. That trajectory would deepen division and mistrust, which we have seen all over the world. I do not believe this is in the best interest of animal welfare, social cohesion or the working people of Ireland, rural or urban.

Deputy Ged Nash: I will speak today on behalf of the Labour Party to express our strong support for the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Fox Hunting) Bill 2025. I want to thank our colleagues for proposing it.

This legislation is not about point-scoring, nor is it about rural Ireland versus urban Ireland. To say it is actually diminishes the points that some who oppose this legislation are seeking to make. It is fundamentally about decency, ethics and whether we are prepared to legislate in line with what we say are stated public values and with modern animal welfare standards. It is first and foremost a moral question.

Fox hunting is an anachronistic and inherently cruel practice that belongs to a past defined by hierarchy, elitism, exclusion, imperialism and the routine acceptance of animal suffering. It has, in our view, no place whatsoever in a modern republic that claims to value compassion, evidence-based policymaking and respect for animal welfare. There is nothing republican about fox hunting. Conservatism again trumps republicanism.

11 o'clock

In recent weeks, my office, along with others, has received hundreds of emails calling for an end to fox hunting. Many of these messages come from constituents who have witnessed hunts at first hand. Their accounts strip away the romanticised language often used to defend this indefensible activity. They describe exhausted animals pursued for hours, terrified livestock, damaged land and an organised spectacle of violence presented - or misrepresented - as tradition. This is not wildlife management; it is cruelty. I see that "rural pursuits" now seems to be a catch-all phrase to justify anything at all that happens in rural Ireland. Again, that does rural Ireland and the people I represent in rural Ireland an absolute disservice. They are not a monolithic, homogenous group.

The public mood on this issue is clear, as was said earlier. A recent national opinion poll conducted by Ireland Thinks found that 72% of the Irish public support a ban on fox hunting. Importantly, this opposition is strong in rural Ireland itself. This is not, as I said, a rural-urban divide. I am proud to represent parts of rural County Louth and have done so for over two decades now.

Yet that consensus is not reflected in the political debate. We continue to hear claims, often repeated without any evidence whatsoever, that fox hunting is vital for farmers or essential to rural life. If fox control is required, farmers already have lawful, proportionate and humane

means to address it. Organised fox hunting with packs of hounds is not, as was said earlier, an effective or humane method of wildlife management. It is the definition, in fact, of inefficiency. A chaotic chase involving dozens of dogs and riders pursuing a single animal cannot credibly be described as pest control. It is neither targeted nor evidence based and it results in extreme suffering.

The claim that fox hunting is central to farming or rural culture is also contradicted by the evidence. In fact, only around 2% of the population has ever participated in a fox hunt. As a sports person, I am not inclined to sanitise this pursuit by calling it a sport. Some 98% of people have no connection to it whatsoever - never have, never will - and the numbers will diminish. A practice engaged in by such a small minority cannot reasonably be described as essential to rural life. Farmers themselves have not demanded this practice be preserved. Many I know have raised serious concerns about hunts trespassing on land, damaging crops, frightening livestock and undermining biodiversity. This is not a harmonious rural tradition; it is an imposition that many rural communities actively oppose.

There is a class context to this too. Let us not forget that or pretend otherwise. There has always been something of the upstairs-downstairs about this and a nonsense we used to see in the stage Irishman depiction of fox hunting in the likes of "The Irish R.M." and so on. It is absolute nonsense and far from republican. The historical context of fox hunting in Ireland cannot be ignored. The Irish Masters of Foxhounds Association was established in 1845, during the Great Famine, and the practice itself is deeply rooted in colonial power structures. This is not a neutral or ancient Irish tradition; it is an imported phenomenon and a colonial blood sport imported and maintained by privilege.

From an animal welfare perspective, the harms associated with fox hunting are simply unavoidable. Foxes endure prolonged pursuit, intense fear and physiological stress before often being violently killed. This suffering is intentional and intrinsic to the activity. I am no agricultural expert and do not claim to be but I know gratuitous cruelty when I see it. Horses used in hunts are also placed under extreme physical and psychological strain. They are pushed to gallop long distances over uneven ground, jump obstacles at speed and suppress natural fear responses in chaotic environments. This exposes them to a high risk of injury, exhaustion, chronic stress and fatal accidents. Hounds are also subjected to welfare risks. They are bred, trained and worked in ways that prioritise performance over well-being, often resulting in injury, exhaustion and premature death. Their natural behaviours are exploited and they are placed in dangerous situations over which they have no control.

I have received messages from people I know and respect in recent days asking me to think of the hounds and what they do naturally and I have one message for people listening in. If these kinds of so-called rural pursuits are ended, they will evolve and they will change. That is an intrinsic part of nature, of who we are as human beings and what mammals do.

Supporters of fox hunting often argue that banning the practice would mean horses and hounds would no longer exist. This is a false dilemma, a false dichotomy. Ending a harmful practice does not require the destruction of the animals involved or make them obsolete in any way. Nature evolves, and their value and the value of each animal endures beyond their limited, in this context, economic function to some. This applies to dogs too.

The claims that fox hunting builds confidence in horses or resilience in humans are also not supported by behavioural science. High-stress environments actually inhibit learning. What is often labelled as bravery is more accurately explained by learned helplessness, a state associated with welfare risks and increased injury. While time in nature, physical activity and social connection are absolutely beneficial to mental health, none of these outcomes depend on the pursuit and the killing of wildlife. Ethical community-building and well-being must not be achieved through harm to sentient beings that cannot consent.

Fox hunting is frequently defended as essential to rural community life, yet participation requires significant financial and social capital, placing it beyond the reach of most people, certainly the people I represent. Presenting it as representative of rural Ireland obscures issues of exclusion and inequality and actually does the argument on the opposite side a disservice. Rural social cohesion is a legitimate policy goal, one I pursue in my everyday work, but it must be addressed through inclusive public infrastructure and services and opportunities, not through exclusive, harmful traditions.

This is not the 1800s; this is supposed to be a modern, sophisticated Republic. I speak for rural Ireland - a new, changing rural Ireland - as much as others do. As I said earlier, modern rural Ireland is not a monolith. The people there are not homogenous. It is a complex community with competing and different interests and, frankly, a lot of those in here who claim to have a monopoly on speaking for those in rural Ireland do rural Ireland a disservice and do not ever reflect the diversity in modern rural Ireland that we have today and the diversity of views.

This animal health and welfare Bill reflects growing recognition that hunting wild mammals with dogs is incompatible with modern welfare standards. Comparable jurisdictions, including the United Kingdom, have already enacted bans, as we know, even though the argument could very well be made that this is some part of a tradition in the UK, albeit an aristocratic, landed gentry one, that goes back centuries. Ireland would not be acting in isolation, therefore, but in line with its stated commitments to animal welfare and EU principles recognising animals as sentient beings.

I urge my colleagues to support this Bill. This is one of those occasions when the introduction of a free vote should be considered. Not to support the Bill would be to continue defending a cruel, unnecessary and, in our view, outdated practice that the Irish public has clearly rejected and will continue to reject. Fox hunting is not about farmers. It is not about rural life. It is, in our view, about cruelty and it is a pursuit that should be consigned to the bin of history and put out of its misery.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank Deputy Coppinger for this really important Bill. It is very timely, so I thank her for her work on it. The Social Democrats will 100% support her in the Bill and her efforts to ban fox hunting.

I will be very clear. Fox hunting is wrong, fox hunting is cruel and fox hunting has no place in the Ireland of today. I was really disappointed to hear what the Minister, Deputy Heydon, said in his speech. I expect the arguments put forward by the Government to be more rational. There was an incredible amount of misinformation provided in the Minister's speech. To be honest, it is something I would have expected from the Independent Members whom I have been debating on this issue over recent weeks. I had thought Fine Gael would provide

something with a bit more humanity, a bit more compassion and a bit more rationality. Let us go through the different arguments.

The Minister said that the fact that Deputies who support this Bill have never met anyone who has been on a hunt undermines our case. I do not need to go on a hunt to know it is cruel. I do not need to go to a bullfight to know it is cruel. I do not need to go to see badger-baiting or to attend a dogfight to know they are cruel. If something is cruel, it is cruel. There is a fundamental basis for animal welfare that we should be applying in this country. It is incredible that the Minister referred to that in his speech.

I will move to the matter of rural versus urban Ireland, and this is a matter that the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, has put forward on numerous occasions. This is not a rural versus urban debate. This is a debate on animal welfare and what we consider to be acceptable in Ireland. Interestingly, since I have been talking about this, a huge number of people from rural Ireland have contacted me, as I am sure they have other Deputies, to express their outrage at fox hunting. They want it banned. A sheep farmer in Cashel said that many farming neighbours agree that the days of having large numbers of horses galloping through farmland in the wettest months of the year are long gone and that fox hunting as a means of curtailing the population is a fallacy.

A Wicklow constituent told me that a hunt passed through their local area and the hounds entered their garden. They split apart and savaged their beloved little dog, Isabelle, killing the dog on my correspondent's property.

Someone from a farming background in Cork told me that the notion that fox hunting is a method of controlling the fox population is ludicrous. They said that fox hunters do far more destruction to farming land and the countryside.

A zoologist in Wicklow, who is also from a farming background, said that hunting with hounds is one of the least effective methods of population control. Farmers have told me that their livestock have been traumatised.

Another man told me that he lives in rural west Cork and there are a couple of practical points that sway him totally against fox hunting. He said that no insurance company will give cover. He said that damage is done to farmers' land and property by fox hunting. He also mentioned the harm to horses, cattle and sheep that no one talks about, and attacks on domestic animals, such as household pets, which have happened. Hunts, in fact, tell you to lock up your pets.

I do not know who the Minister of State listens to when he purports to represent rural Ireland. Those are the voices from rural Ireland that I am hearing. They are the voices to which I will listen.

The argument about this being a good means of controlling foxes is crazy and ridiculous. It is the most inefficient means of controlling foxes. If you have a fox on your land that is causing problems to your livestock, there are alternative methods, such as shooting, that will be a lot more efficient than calling on packs of hounds and hunters to come through your land, through your ditches, wrecking your fences and crops and disturbing all the farm animals on your property. That is no argument whatsoever.

I accept that there are a small number of people who have done this over many years and that there could be an impact on their livelihoods. However, change happens and we have to move with the change. I ask those people to find an alternative to fox hunting. Drag hunting will provide the same job opportunities, the same tourism opportunities and the same opportunities for local hoteliers to get business. It is a controlled method that means you are not wrecking farmers' lands. You would only be going onto farmers' lands if they want you on it. There is no cruelty involved. I ask them to find an alternative to fox hunting.

The Minister said that people should not only be listening to the loud voices. The reason there are loud voices is that there are so many people in this country who do not want fox hunting. Rather than dismiss those loud voices, I ask the Minister of State to listen to them. He should be led by his constituents. His constituents have been on to me asking for this practice to be banned.

I thank Deputy Coppinger. I welcome the fact that Sinn Féin has finally been placed in a situation whereby it has had to declare its position on the issue. It is disappointing. The mask has slipped for Sinn Féin in this regard. I will pass to my colleagues.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It is profoundly wrong to chase a defenceless animal to exhaustion and have it ripped apart by dogs and call that a sport. It is a barbaric and cruel practice that has no place in a modern society. It is a throwback to empire. It is a loathsome practice. Those are not my words. They are the words of backbenchers from Sinn Féin, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Those words ring true and matter. They should be reflected in votes. Tonight, in an act of indifference or cruelty, it appears those backbenchers will come into this Chamber and cast their votes against restricting fox hunting and for barbarism. It is truly galling to see three parties founded against colonialism supporting a colonial practice such as this.

Fox hunting is not just inhumane savagery. It is also one of the last cultural vestiges of that colonialism. Local gentry are cosplaying as British aristocrats in an imported tradition that no Celt, Gael or Brit now engages in. The attempts to justify it as a form of pest control are ludicrous. Imagine the ridicule if Michael O'Leary and Dermot Desmond were to don loincloths and spears and go hunting for deer in the Phoenix Park and then justify it as pest control. It is so outrageous that it would be laughable if it were not the argument of the three big parties today. It is just wrong. It is wrong, wrong, wrong.

The Social Democrats know what is wrong and what is right. The barbaric torture of animals is wrong. Upholding cruel colonial practices is wrong. Blood sports for the pleasure of the wealthy are wrong. Fox hunting is wrong and the parties and Deputies who vote against this Bill are wrong, too.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank Deputy Coppinger for bringing forward this Bill to ban fox hunting. It might seem unlikely that a city TD such as me from Dublin South-Central would have any interest in what is constantly being said affects rural areas and communities. If you bear with me for a minute, I will explain my position.

When I was a child, I split my time between suburban Dublin, in Deputy Coppinger's constituency, and rural Cavan, where my granny and her people are from. My mother lived there for the last part of her life. I spent many weekends in Cavan with my grand-uncle, driving

a tractor, going to fields, feeding cattle, helping on the farm and moving cattle from field to field. As a suburban young person, I also spent my weeks going to school, youth theatre, friends' houses and hanging out on the estate. In those two parts of life, rural and suburban, we loved our animals. That was true of people on both sides. It has nothing to do with where you live. It is about loving and respecting animals.

The Minister said earlier that foxes are not a protected species. That does not mean they can be treated the way they are treated in a fox hunt. They have feelings. They are animals. They have feelings and are, therefore, capable of feeling fear and dread caused by being chased by humans, horses and hounds.

Fox hunting is banned in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. It really is time that Ireland evolved and stopped this cruel and barbaric activity.

Deputy Michael Collins: This issue once again exposes a growing divide in the country between those who live and work in rural Ireland and those who comment on it from a distance with little understanding of what life is actually like on the ground in rural Ireland. Foxes are a real and present danger to livestock and livelihoods and, increasingly, to public safety. Only last week, there were reports of a woman in Cavan being attacked by a fox. That is not something that rural families ever expected to hear. It is, however, a warning of what happens when the wildlife population is allowed to spiral out of control. Farmers see the consequences every year. Lambs are slaughtered during the lambing season. Hens are ripped limb from limb in a single night. Years of careful breeding are wiped out without warning. This is the reality of nature when it is not properly managed.

Rural Ireland is a managed landscape and always has been. Without management, it does not magically balance itself but deteriorates. We only have to look at the deer crisis to see the consequences. Animals are roaming the roads. Cars are destroyed and families are put at risk with no accountability. Do we really want the same situation with foxes? Do we want sick and starving animals wandering roadways and no longer fit to source food? Do we want them dying slow deaths that serve no one? City-based TDs, who know nothing about this reality, are attacking rural traditions and practices that exist precisely to keep the balance and protect both animals and people.

One of the loudest anti-rural voices is that of Deputy Coppinger, who claims to speak for communities.

What does it say about her commitment when she had no difficulty in objecting to a development of over 200 apartments in her own city? This type of objection is devastating to communities where people across the country are desperate for a roof over their heads. We are told she cares about communities, yet she denigrates the Common Agricultural Policy, a policy designed to keep farm families afloat, families who have worked the same land for decades, often centuries. She dismisses it as part of what she calls a global capitalist system of agriculture. That kind of ideological thinking has a long and dark history. Wherever it has been imposed on farming communities it has driven families off their land, stripped them of ownership and handed agriculture over to the state in so-called communal systems that resulted in starvation and the deaths of millions. That is the ideology of Deputy Coppinger. That is what this so-called Bill is based on, anti-farmer, anti-rural poisonous ideology that wants to

punish those who work to own land and work that land for the betterment of themselves and their communities. Rural Ireland does not take lectures from extremists.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I watched everyone standing up here with notebooks in front of them when speaking. What they were saying was rhetorical stuff. It was the same stuff coming out of their mouths. There is no urban and rural divide here. I have people from an urban area who come out hunting in our area and they have done it for decades. I am from a farming background. I live in an area where there is cover behind me. The hunt comes through the back of our land every season. I have seen the devastation a fox has caused when a cow was calving outside in the field. I have seen what it has done to lambs. I have also seen what the hunt has done in curtailing foxes in an area. In our own place, we had two sets of hens. We always kept hens. They were actually savaged so now I do not have hens. People are saying the foxes are making their way into the city and they are. People are feeding foxes in the city. If that is what they want to do, that is what they want to do. If there is overpopulation and no hunting, that will mean we cannot defend against what a fox does to our animals. A woman in Cavan got six stitches during the week defending her chickens. We are not talking about all day, every day. There is a hunting season as there is a slurry season. There is a season for everything. People stood up here today and said they are not from a veterinary background. There are vets involved in this. The veterinary service is involved in this.

The Social Democrats last year tried to ban greyhound hunting. They were on the television saying it was desperate. They were out at the front of the House saying they had a greyhound but it was not a greyhound at all, it was a lurcher.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): A lurcher.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: They did not even know what a greyhound was. The same thing is happening here today. They do not understand the process that is happening here. They did not follow the science. They are talking about a minority of people, saying 2%. What percent of us look after us in terms of the Garda? If we look at a percentage, how many people in this country are medical people? They look after a population of millions. The Deputies are talking about percentages. They should get their facts right before they start discussing things they know nothing about.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: On a point of order, I am just wondering when we are discussing this, can we just ask the Deputies to state whether they have any financial involvement in hunts or the provision of services for hunting?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I have none.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have none. I have never been to one in my life.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is all I am asking.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is a scurrilous accusation to be making.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It is hardly scurrilous to ask for transparency, Minister.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is of course.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: If that is what the Minister of State is worried about, I would be concerned about that. It is transparency and it is Members' responsibility in this Chamber to be clear about any financial benefit.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is not her speaking time. Respect the House.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is just because you did not like what he said. He hurt you in what he said, that is all that is wrong with you, because he told the truth.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Please take your seats. Minister, please take your seat

Deputy Michael Collins: A disgrace.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: He told the truth. The truth hurts.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Please, Minister. Deputy Gogarty has two and a half minutes.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They are very objective over there.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I ask the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach to give Deputy Fitzmaurice the extra time because of this. To be clear, foxes are wild animals. They can be dangerous. They carry leptospirosis. They have tapeworm and toxoplasmosis. They will bite humans if they are hungry. They will attack domestic animals like cats and dogs if they can get away with it. I even heard a story about one robbing a spice bag off someone recently in an urban area. They will kill lambs, especially weak lambs after birth. Foxes are hunters. They are predators. Members have heard the phrase "sly as a fox." That is because they are clever animals. They are not domestic pets, although some people feed them in urban areas, as Deputy O'Donoghue said.

Having said all that, they are dumb animals but not as dumb as the animals that hunt them. There is no rational argument for killing a defenceless wild animal for pleasure. It is the worst form of abuse. It is not for anything else. It is to get off on watching those hounds tear the fox apart, nothing else. It is uncivilised. It is on par with genital mutilation and the way people used to get away with whacking their partners in domestic abuse cases. It is a tradition but one that is long past its time. As others have said, there are alternatives. We have the drag hunting, the clean boot hunting. You can get on your horse, have your rural pursuits, ride on the land, chase, have all your social interactions, dress up and have hunt balls. You can have everything except tearing the fox apart. I am not against culling the fox population if it is causing danger

to people but this is not about culling the fox population, it is about having pleasure at the expense of an animal.

I am particularly disappointed there is no open vote on this with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and especially Sinn Féin. One of my constituency colleagues talked last week about his partner's beautiful whippet called Padmé that brings so much joy to their lives, yet he told me also that he would not be opposing greyhound racing because that is a working man's sport and he said he would take the hit. Fox hunting could not be described as a working man's sport but Sinn Féin is still going to take the hit. Instead of *tiocfaidh ár lá*, it is tally-ho chaps, let us keep it going and keep the vestiges of the British Empire. Let us cop on, have a free vote and get rid of this barbaric practice.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have no financial or other interest in hunting and do not even own a gun. I cannot be accused of being lopsided because of it. A lot of people would not even know what neosporosis is. A farmer in rural Ireland whose cows are aborting will know all about it. It comes from foxes where overpopulation happens. We come from a managed landscape. We saw a few years ago, from Kerry to Donegal, throughout the country, the problem of the overpopulation of deer. People driving on the roads had to dig into their own insurance or their own pockets because of the overpopulation of deer. There were herds of deer running around the country. We have to keep things controlled. For me, as someone who would not have a gun, if your sheep is lambing and you are out at night, it is not a great sight to see - the Deputies talked about all the things that happen the fox - the head of your lamb gone or most of your lamb eaten. For people who are genuinely interested in making sure there is a viable amount of everything in a managed landscape, do they want to see an old fox waddling along the road not able to even get enough food for itself? I see Senator Brady over there. He highlighted the person in Cavan who thought the fox was going to be a nice tame animal that would be their pet and had to get five stitches. Tell that to them.

In cities at the moment, people are feeding foxes. It is trying to tame a wild animal. It does not happen. You bring them three quarters of the way there and they will snarl back at you and catch you. You need to live in the rural areas to understand them. People ask why there is hunting, gun clubs or whatever. The farmer who is affected - when they go out in the morning and see the lamb or whatever gone - they have to contact someone. You do not just run up and see the fox running up the field.

It happened hours ago. What we need is for them to come at weekends to make sure that they find the problem in the area. Overpopulation is a major problem.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this very important matter. I will not be voting for a ban on fox hunting. For fear that people think that there is an urban-rural divide, there is no such thing down the country. Maybe there is somebody inside the Pale here who do not understand rural Ireland, but in rural Ireland we have towns that depend on the farming community, including sheep farmers and cattle farmers. When we saw everything else close down during the virus, the one thing that kept the country moving forward was the farming community. Different things have been hurting the farmers continuously over the years, including foxes. I recall my grandmother's time when she used to have a few turkeys for Christmas. It was her money when she would sell them. Some of her turkeys were taken from her one Christmas. That meant some of her income that she was depending on was not

there for her because a fox took away two of her turkeys that she was feeding since July or August. This is happening continuously.

A good friend of mine, Andrew in Killarney, had 13 hens. He was seeing after them, minding them, feeding them and being very careful with them. He came home one evening and 12 of the hens were gone. That is the gospel truth. For Pat up the road, it is the same story. He had ducks. He makes a few pounds from ducks at the fairs and stuff like that. His ducks are constantly being taken out by the foxes. I had someone contact me the other day who had their two lovely cats taken by the fox. I do not mind whether it is considered a financial interest or not, but it is an interest. At one stage, my son Dan had 18 lambs taken this year in the spring by the foxes. Whether it is hunters, shooters or whoever takes out the fox, I appreciate them for that. Farmers appreciate them for that. I cannot understand why these people who are so concerned about the foxes are not concerned about the hens when they are tor alive. They are not concerned about the lambs when their heads are torn off, their legs are gone and they are riddled. They are poor defenceless little lambs. I do not know what reason people have got against those who never do any harm to anyone and only make a few pounds for the farmers who are struggling.

Their sheep payment has been reduced a small bit this year. We are hoping we will get back again next year. One of the things that the Deputy who is bringing forward this Bill said was that the farmers are all right because they get grants. They do not a grant to replace the money that the lamb would have made. That is the gospel truth. When the Ministers are answering the contributions, I want them to address that issue. They do not get a grant when the lamb is taken away, riddled, half eaten, or half left there. I want the Deputy to withdraw that remark. Deputies said the cause of the foxes doing harm was development. These same Deputies do not want the development of houses. They are objecting them. They are here by the way for the good of the people; they are not. It is very wrong to throw it around that way because that is not the truth. People need houses, but we need farmers. We have not got many people on the hill sides sheep farming because sadly that is not paying. Many farmers have cut down the number of ewes that they keep because they have not got the wherewithal to traverse these massive hills and valleys, look after them, dose them and all the cost that goes with that. They have cut numbers, but they need to have what they have and not have it taken by the fox.

It is wrong to be coming in here trying to hurt someone. My late father used to say, "If you can't help someone, please don't hurt them." I take that with me every road that I go on. I do not ever intend to do that. I hope that I can make something better for someone every day when I get up and before I go to bed at night again. I certainly would not be trying to stop farmers killing foxes because we know what the foxes do. It is their psyche or whatever it is. They do not need the lambs they kill because they leave some of them behind and tear them asunder. I cannot understand why the Members who intend to bring in this Bill are so vehement about this and at the same time they have no concern for the poor lambs, hens or ducks that people work hard to rear. To see them taken in a flash, they come back they are gone and dead. Lately, there were two men who went down the fields because the fox was after taking some of the hens. When they were coming up, they met the fox again with another hen in his mouth. That is the truth.

We must vote against this. I am appealing to all the Deputies from around the country who depend on farmers for their votes. Now is the time to come out to stand with the farmers and

vote against this Bill. It is not fair and it is not right. To those Members on the other side who are trying to bring this forward, if they cannot help someone, why are they trying to hurt them? It is wrong to do that to people. These poor farmers down the country, up the country and in the west of the country are depending on lambs and to a lesser extent people are depending on hens to have their own eggs. They like to do that. Why are we trying to hurt them by bringing in a Bill banning fox hunting? It is totally and absolutely wrong. They should be ashamed of themselves to be even thinking about it and talking about it, never mind bringing in a Bill here. It is a sad way our country has gone.

We have a lot of important issues to debate here. We should not have to debate this. Seeing as we have to debate it, we will debate it. We will vote against it tonight. I assure people out there that I will be voting against this fox hunting Bill introduced by Deputy Coppinger and whoever else is standing with her because it is not fair on rural Ireland. When I say rural Ireland, I mean the towns and villages because those people depend on the farmers as well for their income. They all get a bit out of it. If the lamb goes down the field in the fox's mouth or is torn alive and left for dead, no one will get anything out of them. This issue of a financial interest has been mentioned. It is as if we are betting on some stock exchange or something and that we were going to gain from it. It is such a ridiculous statement for Deputy Whitmore to make saying that we have a financial interest. We have an interest in the well-being of farmers around the country. We have an interest in the people who keep poultry, depend on them and put money into them. These things do fall out of the sky. It is very sad when if you go into a field and see the ewe going around the field looking for her lamb, baaing and upset. The Deputies have no interest in that. How is that? I cannot understand that or appreciate that. I appeal to the Ministers to ensure that the Government to a man and woman votes against this fox hunting Bill, as I will be doing.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): To make it very clear, the Government will 100% oppose this Bill as it is proposed.

I will call it out for what it is. It is extremely misleading. I would go so far as to say it is a con job. I will tell the House why. As currently drafted, the Bill proposes to ban all hunting for foxes, regardless of the purpose of that hunting and the manner in which it is carried out. That has been ignored today several times by several speakers. They have given the impression that this is about people up on horses-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is.

Deputy Seamus Healy: It is.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----with red coats shouting "Tally-ho". That is rubbish. That is not what this Bill proposes to ban and the people who are saying otherwise obviously have not read it in its entirety. If farmers have lambs outside in a field and want to protect them, this Bill would make them criminals tomorrow if they shot foxes tonight.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It does not say that at all.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is exactly the legal opinion regarding what is proposed here.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Put down an amendment.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I will make that very clear.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Table an amendment.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I was not going to talk about Deputy Gogarty at all but, seeing as he is interrupting me, I will say that he completely misled everybody here. He obviously did not read the Bill because he does not know what he is talking about.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Put down a Committee Stage amendment.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: If he did, he would not have said what he said. A lot has been said about the 73% of people who say that they do not want this type of fox hunting to continue. There is an important statistic left out of that, which is that 98% of those people said they had never seen a hunt or foxes being killed. They never saw anything. All they are doing is listening to media reports about this. These 73% are talking about something that 98% of them know absolutely nothing about in the first instance.

I take issue with a comment Deputy Coppinger made earlier with regard to hill farming. She spoke as if she knew what she was talking about but unfortunately she obviously does not because she mentioned a word that Deputy Danny Healy-Rae mentioned a minute ago, that is, "grants". Is she living in the real world? She seems to be suggesting that, if a farmer goes into a field tomorrow and finds dead lambs - when I say dead, their throats will have been pulled apart by the Deputy's beautiful foxes and their limbs will have been torn asunder in the same way as hens will be - it is all right because the farmers will get a grant. That is rubbish. They will lose out financially. It is not just that. The Deputy said nothing about the torture the lambs, hens and geese go through. I heard it said earlier that we should compare dogs with foxes. This is wrong, dangerous and absolutely misleading. I was shocked to hear Deputy O'Gorman speak earlier but, then again, his lack of knowledge is exemplified by the Green Party when it comes to being out of touch with rural issues. This is not the first time he has showed a lack of knowledge about issues such as this.

I do not welcome this debate but I welcome the fact that we will be able to vote the Bill down tonight. It is part of a constant attack, whether it is on the greyhound industry, horse racing or fishing. The Deputies all seem to hate the term "rural pursuits" all of a sudden. Why do they hate it? It means so much to so many people. It is like shooting. Maybe the Deputies think it is wrong to shoot grey crows. Do they know what a grey crow does to a defenceless lamb? If it is in any way weak or sick, the grey crow will come down from the sky and pull out its two eyes. The Deputies do not want to hear that. They think the person who goes out to shoot grey crows is wrong. Along with others, they want to continue attacking rural Ireland. Let us take the deer for example. People are now realising that we have an overpopulation of deer in this country. We have to reduce the figure by 75%. This is management of rural Ireland.

You cannot just leave everything go as it is. If the Deputies had their way, they would do away with live exports, pig farming and the whole idea of people rearing chickens and all of that. They are against any type of farming, including intensive dairy farming.

I heard Deputy Paul Murphy talking about this cruel and barbaric affair. He does not seem to care at all about what the foxes do and the cruelty they inflict on other animals. Members spoke about badgers earlier on. Do they realise that our senior Minister is engaged on the most important issue of protecting our herd from TB at the moment?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The badgers have nothing to do with it. It is a waste of money.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The badgers are absolutely a leading contributor to the spread of TB.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is nonsense. There are loads of papers on this.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Again, this is something the Deputy knows nothing about.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government is wasting our money-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is scientific fact.

Deputy Paul Murphy: -----on killing badgers.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Silence. Listen to the Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is a scientific fact but, of course, the other side do not want to hear that because they think the badgers are beautiful. Tell that to a farmer like the good friend of mine who yesterday saw 17 in-calf heifers having to leave his yard because they had contracted TB. Why? It was because of badgers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is absolute nonsense. It is not badgers. It is a waste of public money.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We have to eradicate badgers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister of State is going to sell them out on Mercosur.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We have to eradicate our deer. We have to manage rural Ireland. I have heard people talking about colonial pursuits. Again, they are trying to give the public the message that this is only about people up on horses running after the poor fox. It is not. It is about the poor farmer who has to get up in the middle of the night to try to identify, follow, track and kill a fox because it is killing his or her lambs. That is what everybody over there wants to ignore. Some people's speeches have been extremely misleading.

I recognise that Deputy Cronin actually did read the Bill. Her speech was entirely her own opinion but at least she knew what she was talking about, unlike other Members who just seem to be taking the narrative put out there.

I reserve a very special word for Deputy Whitmore. I am sorry that, like a wasp, she came in, stung and ran but I will respond to her. On behalf of myself and Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, I will say one thing to her. This is the lady who is so anti-farming that, at a critical time when the Minister, Deputy Heydon, was doing everything he could to lead a campaign to maintain a nitrates derogation, she did everything she could to sabotage and undermine that. She spoke to the media and made a presentation to Commissioner Roswall in which she tried to completely undermine our hardworking farmers but she failed, just as she will fail tonight. The reason I reserve a special word for her, on behalf of myself and Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, is that she mentioned that she was contacted by some of our constituents. That same Deputy actually said on the record that she wonders who we represent. I will remind her of a small fact. Up to 30% of the electorate who went out to vote voted for a Healy-Rae. She can stick that in her pipe and smoke it. You cannot go against the electorate. They are the bosses. Could she say the same thing about herself, her political party or any of the Deputies over there? If they got 30% of the vote, they would be in orbit.

When I am on a roll, I will take them out one by one. I heard what Deputy Eoin Hayes said about the Brits. He was talking absolute rubbish, again because he did not read or understand the Bill and does not care about the farmers who want to protect their livestock.

Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned something else in a very knowledgeable and sound way. He mentioned the diseases foxes spread. He said that cows can lose calves as the result of contracting diseases. He was right to raise that matter. I do not know if he was the only Member to raise it.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: On a point of order, I raised it before him.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What has happened here over the past couple of weeks has been completely misleading. Again, what she is trying to do has been misrepresented. She is attacking rural Ireland. She is attacking our farming community.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Who is "she"?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The people who are with her are misrepresenting what they are actually trying to do.

I am delighted that they will lose the vote tonight and the people who want to continue killing foxes will be entitled to do so.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: She will not take away their pursuit.

Deputy Paul Murphy: You are out of touch.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): That finishes the Government slot. I now ask the proposer of the Bill, Deputy Coppinger, to make her closing remarks.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We will leave aside the dripping misogyny that we have had to sit and listen to for the past few minutes from somebody who is sitting in the Department of agriculture talking about Deputy Whitmore and about myself. However, I will deal with the issues the Government and the other parties have raised. It is very clear that they are trying to make a culture war out of something that is very simple. It is about cruelty to the fox. None of the speakers who spoke against the Bill have even bothered to deal with whether or not they think it is cruel to the fox. All of the other extraneous issues have been talked about. I absolutely agree that rural life is in crisis. They may be surprised to think that. However, it is in crisis for a lot of reasons.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: You know nothing about it.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: How do you know what I know?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy, no interruptions please.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I actually do not live in a city. I live in a suburb. I spent my childhoods in the country. It is how I feel when the Deputy starts talking about women, women's rights and women's bodies. I just have to sit and listen to it. However, when I want to talk about rural areas, all of a sudden I do not have a right. Just cop on. We are here as national TDs for national issues. We can raise whatever we like. Rural life is in crisis because of the FDI economic model that this Government has encouraged from day one. I refer to centralisation. I do not agree with everything being centralised around Dublin or around Leinster. I do not agree with Dublin Airport's passenger cap being just lifted, for example. We should be decentralising. I do not agree with the lack of infrastructure and I do not agree with the housing crisis, which is making it very difficult for people to have homes-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is why you object to houses, is it?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----in rural Ireland.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Minister, please.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I also do not agree with pubs, post offices and all of those things being lost in rural areas but those are the policies that are led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael with whom the Minister of State is in government.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: And that is why you are an objector.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Minister, please.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to raise some of the alternatives to fox hunting because I did not get a chance to mention them. To be clear, drag hunting is something with which I have absolutely no issue. It allows people to go out on horses or with their dogs. They follow an artificial scent across agreed routes. Clean boot hunting is another one that is being done in the UK. What this Bill does not deal with is a number of things. It does not deal with shooting. Somebody can shoot a fox. The Bill does not mention it. When you are drafting a Bill, if something does not get mentioned, it means it is not in it. We heard issues from Sinn Féin and that it was its members' position at its Ard-Fheis, that they have had a debate. Gun clubs were mentioned continually. This is nothing to do with gun clubs; this is about fox hunting. It was also said that people do not go out with a cruel intent. It does not matter about their intent. If the end object is that a fox will be caught and killed in a prolonged way, it is cruel.

Drag hunting is an alternative Sinn Féin might argue for at its Ard-Fheis. I do not agree with this thin end of the wedge argument. We are dealing with one issue. We are dealing with fox hunting. Members vote on that and on that alone and they should leave the deliberate misrepresentation out of it.

Deputy Kenny said he has had a groundswell of support. The groundswell of support has come from people in favour of the Bill. Let us be clear about that. There has been massive social media support and from the number of people who have got behind this in the seven months since I raised this on First Stage. Deputy Cronin talked about her personal beliefs colliding with her party, about how she has to go in and vote for this because united Ireland is her priority and she is involved in a collective struggle. First, there was a suggestion that I am splitting the left by raising stuff. I am going to come in and raise issues to do with anyone who is oppressed or animals that are being brutally treated. I cannot wait around for Sinn Féin to change its policy; I am sorry. If I had waited for that, we would not have had repeal. I was bringing repeal Bills in here. Sinn Féin was sitting socially conservatively on issues. I cannot wait for it to catch up. That is not why I was elected. I was elected to push things forward, not sit and wait for the rest to catch up. The only people who are splitting the left is people who do not agree that animal rights is a priority issue for the left. People who are serious about a progressive left would want to question why they cannot convince their party conference to get rid of fox hunting. They really should be able to push how important that is.

Deputy Carthy talked about regulation. The problem is it is regulated and as we can see it is a free for all in reality because there is so much of it happening. I will finish that point by saying that TDs were mentioned because a number of TDs have told people when they were going to vote last year that they were against blood sports and fox hunting. People are absolutely entitled to contact those TDs and ask them to vote with us tonight. To say we are somehow targeting TDs, people should get a grip here. It included people in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael but it just so happens that a lot of TDs in Sinn Féin gave people the impression that the party was against fox hunting and against blood sports. Sinn Féin did not have its Ard-Fheis in the autumn. I understand it had to postpone it. That was a good reason to allow a free vote tonight as the party did not have time to change its position. However, everybody who voted last year - most people, certainly - would have expected that Sinn Féin was in line with this Bill.

Regarding the hostility to rural life that is being talked about, there is a sell-out coming up on Mercosur and other EU issues. This Government is going to sell out the people it drums up

in rural areas. To talk about fox hunting is a nice distraction for the Government, making it out that it is the big bad people from Dublin coming here taking all of their livelihoods away. I recognise that people do have livelihoods involved in this. I am absolutely open to discussion but I think there are alternatives.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: They can get a grant.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I explained about the grant. The Minister of State obviously misunderstood what I said.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: No, I understood-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What I said-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You do not understand your own Bill.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): No interruptions please, Minister.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is my time to speak now. I know the Minister of State finds that hard.

The other issue is why we are talking about this now. The reason is that I get Private Members' time one and half times a year. That is why we are talking about it now. It is not a plot to make anyone look bad. It was either now or some time later. The reason it was put forward now was that it became a big issue in the Presidential election and I really thought a number of people would have caught up. On the thing about a grant, we had a briefing here last week. People from rural areas were there. We had a number of people here, such as Frankie Ward who has produced booklets talking about how this can be integrated into farming life. He has done surveys among sheep farmers and has talked about ways to protect livestock. One of the issues I raised on the grant was in the context of allowing hill farmers, who may be more open, obviously, to their sheep being taken, to have grants to help protect their sheep. The Minister of State is in government now, so that would have been something he could have helped with.

There is a whole load of people who are going to come to the House tonight and press a button against this Bill. Some 80% of people are opposed to blood sports. Some 80% of people are opposed to fox hunting if you exclude the do-not-knows. If they are included, 73% were opposed to it in the last poll. They are from all around the country, rural and urban Ireland.

We have a problem in this House. Three of the big parties are going to come in here and vote the exact opposite of what most of the population wants. They can make up any excuse they like, that they are representing rural Ireland or whatever else but the reality is there. That was why I called for a free vote, to at least allow TDs, who have given the general public the impression that they will uphold what they said they stood for, to express that. This is not a rural-urban issue.

In conclusion, these are some of the comments from rural people who have contacted me. I mentioned Frankie Ward. Randal Plunkett is also here. I welcome the people who have attended - we have a packed Gallery - because we can see what an issue this is. Randal Plunkett, who runs the Dunsany nature reserve, has talked about the battle he has had getting these fox hunters to agree to keep off his land. They completely ignored him, he has gone to the police and nothing happens. That is the experience of loads of people throughout rural Ireland. I have testimony from a farmer in County Waterford as well about how they arrived unannounced on horseback or on foot.

12 o'clock

There are complaints about the Comeragh harriers. I could go on but I only have 15 seconds left. There is similar testimony from rural Galway.

People in rural Ireland do not support fox hunting. The Minister of State has interests in tourism and maybe he is gaining financially from this, but there are very few people doing so in rural Ireland. There are other pursuits that could be encouraged to replace it.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is fairly pathetic now.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We need to support what 80% of the population wants.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is fairly pathetic but I would expect nothing better.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time this evening.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Before calling Deputy McDonald, I welcome to the Gallery the following guests of Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Marianne, Pat, Clare, Daniel and Jack Tierney from Mountrath, County Laois; Rachel and Ciara Coughlan from Cloyne, County Cork; and Mary Angela Downes and Brigid O'Sullivan from Knockaderry, County Limerick.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: As this is the last time I will take to my feet this year, I extend to everyone a very happy and peaceful Christmas. Nollaig shona daoibh go léir.

At the start of this year, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael formed the Government on the back of a grubby deal with Michael Lowry and his group of so-called Independents - a grubby deal that was all about keeping power, not about what is good for ordinary people. It was a deal that saw the Government appoint a record number of super-junior Ministers to Cabinet. Of course, the courts will have their say on that matter on Friday. Eleven months on, at the end of the year, we have a do-nothing Government. It is a Government whose first year has been defined by failure, scandal and broken promises. Its failure in housing persists, with devastating consequences for people desperate to put an affordable roof over their head. When it comes to

passing legislation, the Government is at nothing. It has passed the fewest number of laws in the first year of any government this century. In 25 years, over six governments, this Government is the worst. It is a go-slow coalition that cannot even get the basics of governance done.

Then there is the cost of living. People are hammered with price increases and rip-off bills but the Government refuses to help. It refused to bring forward a cost-of-living package. It delivered a budget of €9.4 billion that, astonishingly, left working people worse off. It hiked up the price of petrol, diesel, home heating oil, road tolls and the local property tax. The Government allows big energy companies and large supermarket chains to price-gouge and fleece people. It does nothing to stop it. Worse than that, over the past week, we have seen the most mean-spirited, lousy approach in respect of blister packages, which is putting pressure on low-income people, including the elderly. Again, this was done without costing the Government a thought.

Then there is the Government's waste of public money. Millions of euro have been wasted on bike sheds, security huts and empty offices. There is also, of course, a raft of broken election promises, of which there are many. The Government promised to cut student fees but hiked them up. It promised action to get bills and prices down; they go up and up. It promised to give workers a break on their income tax but instead gave those tax breaks to developers, landlords and banks. As soon as the Government got back into power, its promises disappeared like snow off a ditch.

The most damning failure of this do-nothing Government is its failure of the children who are denied assessments of needs and school places, children living in poverty and children living with scoliosis and spina bifida. This will be Gillian and Stephen Morrison Sherratt's first Christmas without Harvey. The unimaginable pain of losing Harvey has been compounded by the fact he was deliberately removed from a waiting list by Children's Health Ireland. That was done without the knowledge or consent of Harvey's parents. Children with scoliosis and spina bifida were promised they would wait no longer than four months for their surgeries. Does the Taoiseach remember that promise? Harvey was just one of the children for whom that promise was broken time and again. Today, 233 children wait for their operations. Every day they wait, the Government fails them, just as it failed Harvey.

Tá faic déanta ag an Rialtas. Le linn na chéad bhliana in oifig, bhí sé gafa i scannal, teipeanna agus gealltanais bhriste. There we have it - the Taoiseach's do-nothing Government's year of failure laid bare. Those failures have big consequences for so many people. Does the Taoiseach accept his Government is the worst-performing government this century?

The Taoiseach: Ní aontaím in aon chor leis an Teachta. Before I start, I express my gratitude to the Ceann Comhairle and her team and all the staff in the Oireachtas who help us elected representatives to do our job, day in and day out.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: I refer to the clerks, security staff, cleaners, catering staff and all who quietly go about their business and create what is essentially the community that underpins our nation's democracy. I also thank all the TDs in the House. We may differ on matters - we do not agree

on everything - but I believe we are all here for the right reason, which is to advance the interests of the people of this country. I wish everybody a well-earned break with their family and loved ones. I thank my own team and the officials in my Department and wish them a happy and peaceful Christmas. Nollaig shona agus athbhliain faoi mhaise daoibh go léir. I wish a happy Christmas to Deputy McDonald as well. I hope she has a very good rest and break.

In relation to the first year of the Government, I would take an opposite view to Deputy McDonald. I generally think she takes the soundbite approach as opposed to dealing with the issues of real substance. The Government came into office at a time of huge geopolitical turbulence, with tariffs, etc. We have navigated the tariff situation skilfully, effectively and with impact. We have reduced the threats to this country significantly as a result of our work within Europe and bilaterally with the US and by influencing the European approach to the discussions with America. That was a significant threat, if the Deputy recalls, at the beginning of the Government's term. We worked with industry, including the medical devices, pharmaceutical, biopharmaceutical and life sciences sectors, to make sure we were on the ball in terms of dealing with the core issues in a very difficult situation.

It was likewise in terms of the security situation facing Europe, with a war in Europe for the first time since the Second World War. We have navigated that. We have worked with principle in terms of dealing with those issues. We also took a principled stance in relation to the shocking genocide in Gaza.

Economically, we are heading to be the fastest growing among the world's most advanced economies this year. We will have 2.8 million people at work. That is 550,000 additional people at work in the Irish economy between 2020 and 2025. We have 2.825 million people at work. It is a record in the labour market. That creates its own challenges but it is a positive. I can remember other decades when people in this country could not get work. We should never take that for granted. I know the Deputy does take it for granted, dismisses it all and keeps coming up with ideas and proposals that would undermine the enterprise economy that is critical.

One of the core Government deliveries this year was infrastructure and proper investment in the productive capacity of our economy and society into the future. Investments in water infrastructure, the energy grid and housing have all been announced in the context of the national development plan. Big projects like MetroLink have been green-lighted and are on their way. The planning has come through. Projects like the Shannon eastern and midlands water plan are big projects. No doubt Deputy McDonald will come at us objecting to some of them but these are very big projects for the future of this country.

In research investment, we have the INSPIRE programme. I have never heard Deputy McDonald mention the word "research" in five or six years. She has never raised it with me, yet research is critical to the future of this country in terms of the jobs of the future, products of the future and ideas for the future.

That is what matters ultimately in terms of a measurement of a government, not the quantum of legislation passed. We passed 32 Bills in 2020. Why? Eleven of them were to do with the emergency arising from the pandemic. I do not accept the analysis Deputy McDonald has put

forward. We have a lot of law and regulation in this country. Some would argue we have too much regulation, which has stopped us getting the roads, bridges and railways built.

Let us have balance and perspective here.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: As for judging any government, there is a whole range of issues and I will get back to some in the supplementary response.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We are doing more for children now in terms of our investments.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy McDonald.

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald did not want us to do targeted measures for child poverty in the budget, but we did it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach should please forgive me, as I did omit the issue of infrastructural failures from my list. I thank him for jogging my memory. In fact, the mythical metro of which he speaks has gone on for decades. It is a bit like the children's hospital. It is one of these things that is spoken of in hushed tones, billions are allocated and maybe one day we will wake up and it will be a reality, or maybe not - certainly not on the Taoiseach's watch. I would not have any great hope.

It is the Taoiseach who engages in spin and soundbites when he is called out about the reality of people's lives on the ground and the fact that people are struggling with their bills. He refuses to help. In fact, he takes action to make matters worse. The fact is that he has spectacularly failed our children, in particular those I have listed who are awaiting assessments of need, looking for school places or living with scoliosis and spina bifida. He has no answer to that because his is a government of failure, legislatively and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy McDonald. I call on the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ----- on a day-to-day basis in very practical ways, in making people's lives easier.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In fact, it seems to me that his ambition is to make people's lives more difficult. How is that for a Christmas bonus for people?

The Taoiseach: That is a bit silly. The bottom line is that we are prioritising children and we want to do that. It is accepted that there are issues facing children in this country, but we

provided for a major 20% increase in investment in disability services. As the Deputy knows, we are now developing a new education therapy service, which will be transformative. It will start in special schools early in the new year. It will be expanded into all special schools in the school year beginning in September of next year. Then we will expand it into the mainstream classes. That will have multidisciplinary teams in schools for children with disabilities.

In parallel with that, we are investing in disability services. We are amending the assessment of need to make sure we prioritise the provision of therapists to children, as opposed to them being behind desks doing all sorts of assessments that are not the optimum use of their time. We need therapists to work with children on the ground. We have 400 new special classes this year, and we also have 300 new special school places sanctioned for the 2025-26 school year.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: A total of €3 billion has now been invested in special education, and rightly so. It will continue.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Lawlor.

Deputy George Lawlor: Again last night there was traffic chaos across Dublin after the M50 was closed due to a fire near the bridge. This rippled across the city and the counties surrounding Dublin. For those relying on public transport, there is more and more evidence of a system falling apart or not functioning: ghost buses, cancelled trains, and a Luas that shuts down due to a storm. Commuters are tearing their hair out and the roll-back of remote working arrangements is putting more workers on the road from places like my constituency of Wexford.

My colleague, Deputy Wall, has raised the need for a new Operation Freeflow, a real right to remote work and better roads policing. Every TD in this House can recount to the Taoiseach problems with public transport in their constituencies but he has abandoned the 2:1 ratio of investment in much-needed buses, trains and trams. Those travelling to work in this House every day know the chaos that driving or commuting to Dublin now involves. With increased congestion, we are also seeing driver behaviour deteriorating. Those who follow the rules of the road can only sit and watch those reckless drivers breaking the rules, acting with impunity. It is a vicious cycle.

The road safety campaign group, PARC, has highlighted the decline in the number of motoring fines in recent years. This summer we saw the publication of the Crowe report on roads policing. That should have been a wake-up call on the need for stronger action. Sadly, the rise in dangerous driving and issues with roads policing is reflected in the rise in deaths on our roads. Already this year, 180 people have been killed on our roads, eight more than last year. In recent weeks, there has been a shocking number of horrific accidents. Each death is a tragedy for the families of those killed that will be deeply felt next week as they gather for the Christmas the Taoiseach has just spoken about. If current trends continue, the overall figure will surpass the 184 killed in 2023, which was the highest number in almost a decade. It is not clear what strategy the Government has to address this distressing increase. The official goal is to halve road deaths by 2030. Instead, Ireland is one of the few European countries where road deaths are increasing. The road safety strategy is failing.

We learn from *The Journal* today that the Government has abandoned the plan agreed last year to reform the Road Safety Authority by splitting it into two separate bodies – one that is responsible for road safety and another for operational activities like the NCT and driver testing. This was recommended following an independent external review of the Road Safety Authority. What is the Government's plan to reduce road deaths as we enter the most dangerous period of the year for road users? Why has the Government abandoned the plan to reform the Road Safety Authority? Will there be an increased level of roads policing and enforcement over the next two weeks?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has identified a number of issues, ranging from public transport and the M50 to road safety. For me, the latter is the most significant issue. There is very significant traffic congestion on the M50. It is a vital piece of national infrastructure. Growth in our economy and in our population has added significantly to the traffic. Overall levels on the M50 have grown by 11% since 2019. There is huge investment going into public transport. I do not agree with the 2:1 ratio. It is too crude a mechanism. A lot depends on when a project comes to completion, as it draws down an awful lot more money than at the beginning. The 2:1 ratio is not a sensible framework on a year-to-year basis to judge investment in public transport versus investment in roads.

In regard to investment in roads, the Macroom bypass, for example, was huge for safety. It was better for safety, air pollution and the quality of life of the people living in all the towns – Macroom, Baile Bhuirne and others - along the way, yet people would say it is anti-climate or whatever to build a bypass like that. I have never accepted the ideological orthodoxy of some people on that side of the fence. At the same time, we need to invest hugely in public transport. That is what we are doing with BusConnects, MetroLink and DART+. We now have about 1 million public transport journeys a day. Last year alone we had over 343 million public transport journeys. That is increasing but we need more on that front.

Historically, the establishment of the Road Safety Authority was the most significant measure taken in respect of dealing substantially with road deaths. As I have previously done in the House, I pay a lot of tribute to the former Minister, Noel Dempsey, who really took on this issue with the late Gay Byrne. They transformed it. They were very unpopular in this House because they took measures that many parliamentarians opposed on drink driving and all sorts of penalties, but they did it and it is a lesson to everybody. Every now and again we need a bit of backbone in politics to do the right thing and get over the short-term opposition and knee-jerk reactions. Our roads did become much safer after that and we significantly reduced road deaths and injuries. We need to do the same now. There is a serious increase - not back to the levels of the 1970s or 1980s - that is causing untold trauma to families and young people. We have had some horrific accidents in recent times that horrify us in terms of the trauma that has been visited on so many parents and families. I favour the retention of the Road Safety Authority as the pre-eminent authority to deal with road safety. It will have the resources to do that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach and call on Deputy Lawlor to respond.

Deputy George Lawlor: I am glad to hear the Taoiseach's commitment to public transport. However, in the strategic rail review, the Rosslare to Waterford rail line has been abandoned

yet again. There is no investment in the Rosslare Europort to Dublin line, despite the massive investment that is going to happen in Rosslare Europort. Despite the talk, there are known road safety blackspots in every constituency. In my constituency, the absolutely dreadful conditions of rural roads in particular are appalling. It is mainly due to the massive and continuing underfunding of Wexford County Council. Despite the fact that local authorities are doing their best, every TD could say the same about councils across the country. Who is responsible for identifying the structural failures on our roads and ensuring best practice is implemented? Budgets are committed to deliver safer roads and stakeholders are held accountable for failings. Overhauling the Road Safety Authority was the Government's chance to deliver an agency with the powers to make our roads safer, not just to spend on PR campaigns. What will the Government do now to reduce road deaths? What new action will the Taoiseach undertake?

The Taoiseach: An Garda Síochána will be very active over Christmas in particular. It is conducting a dedicated road traffic enforcement operation throughout the Christmas period, which began on Monday, 1 December and will continue until Monday, 5 January. The Deputy is correct. Investing in better and safer roads, continued enforcement of the law and increasing the allocation of gardaí to front-line duties are all part of the measures that we are going to be taking on an ongoing basis. We are going to implement the road safety strategy 2021 to 2030. We are going to do everything possible through our enforcement. The Garda Commissioner is taking this very seriously. The Minister for justice has been speaking to the Garda Commissioner in respect of this. I accept the Deputy's fundamental point. Every road fatality that occurs on our roads is a profound tragedy for a family somewhere in our country. Collectively, if we are all agreed, I am willing to work with the Opposition in terms of any measures that people think are meritorious in terms of reducing accidents on our roads.

Deputy Holly Cairns: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I thank all of the staff in the Houses and wish them all and Members a very happy Christmas.

The most shameful legacy of this Government is its failure to get to grips with homelessness. Every month, the homeless figures are announced and new records are set. There are now 16,766 people living in emergency accommodation - a staggering amount. Included in this figure are 5,274 children. That is 5,274 children who will spend Christmas in cramped hotel rooms or hubs, 5,274 children who will not get to sit down at their own kitchen table to eat Christmas dinner and 5,274 children whose parents are heartbroken. For many of these children, it will be their second or even third year spending Christmas in emergency accommodation. When Fianna Fáil first entered Government with Fine Gael in 2020, there were 2,653 children living in emergency accommodation. Under the Taoiseach's watch, in just five years the number of children who are homeless has nearly doubled. That is this Government's record. Every month, that record gets worse and worse.

The damage this is doing to thousands of children is immense. One study found that homeless children were more likely to be bullied and twice as likely to require hospitalisation. One clinic treating children in emergency accommodation found that in nearly 30% of cases the child had developmental delays. Increasing numbers of children in emergency accommodation are also presenting with problems associated with malnutrition, including problems like rickets, anaemia, faltering growth, extreme tooth decay and skin conditions. It

is even harder for children with additional needs who experience huge trauma from having to live in noisy and cramped conditions.

When the homeless crisis is discussed in this Chamber, the Government adopts the position of a kind of concerned commentator, as if it is helplessly watching this human tragedy unfold. The Government is not some kind of hapless bystander powerless to act. It has the full might of the State at its disposal, it just chooses not to do enough about it. It is the Government's housing policies that have put these children and their families in emergency accommodation and those same housing policies will ensure that more children and families join them. The figures speak for themselves - a 99% increase in homelessness in five years. The Taoiseach mentioned the need for backbone in politics at times. If this is not the time, when is? Will he introduce a temporary no-fault eviction ban to prevent more children ending up homeless over Christmas?

The Taoiseach: From the Deputy's perspective, that is the short-term popular answer, is it not? All that would do would depress supply. The fundamental answer to homelessness is supply. The Deputy's party has never got that. All its proposals, in my view, would actually depress supply and reduce it. That is the fundamental difference between us. I am not going for the short-term popular thing, to ban this and all of that. It sounds great, but it would be damaging to getting more supply into the market. That is the bottom line. Homelessness is a huge issue facing the country. It is a complex issue, far more complex than the manner in which she has presented it. It is not all at the door of the Government. We had a good presentation at the housing Cabinet subcommittee meeting earlier this week, which illustrated the complex factors behind homelessness and different categories of people becoming homeless for different reasons, requiring a different response. It contained a whole range of issues outside of the control of some people which need attention.

I have to be careful in how I say this, but there are pressures coming from the increase in the population and migratory pressures do factor into the homeless issue. In Dublin, if you look at it, the figures are very clear. I will be talking to the Dublin regional executive about this and what we can do to help. That is why the issue is increasing. People coming out of direct provision, for example, and family reunification are creating challenges. It is the right thing to do. Our challenge is to provide housing solutions. Let us not pretend it is all just because of wanton neglect or that someone does not care.

Since this Government and the last Government came in, 50,000 social homes have been added to the social housing stock - over 50,500. That is way ahead of anything in three or four decades. You would have to go back to the 1970s to get as many social houses delivered by any Government. We are going to continue that in the new housing plan because social housing is key to dealing with the homeless issue. The level of investment is continuing to increase and will continue to increase to deal with that issue. The Minister, to be fair, is developing further approaches, particularly to child homelessness. He received in the budget a further €100 million additionally to focus exclusively on children and families with children to get them out of emergency accommodation as quickly as possible. In the last two to three years, the numbers that we are getting out in a more timely way out of emergency accommodation has increased. Obviously, the objective is to prevent people going into emergency accommodation, but once they are in there, we then must move to get people out as quickly as possible. We have said to the local authorities that they must prioritise families with children who are in emergency

accommodation. You will begin to see the impacts from the initiatives that the Minister has taken, particularly because of the additional budget he has received. That is the way to try to address the issue.

Deputy Holly Cairns: There was a time when homelessness reaching 10,000 people would have been considered a resigning matter for this Government - for any Government - and rightly so, but somehow this Government has succeeded in normalising it. That is extremely dangerous. There is nothing normal about it. A total of 16,766 people are homeless, including 5,274 children. These are not just figures; they are people who are suffering. The Taoiseach stands up week after week and blames the Opposition, the planning laws and EU red tape. The latest fall guy today is immigrants.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Hear, hear.

Deputy Holly Cairns: We know that the biggest cause of families entering homelessness is eviction. We know that. It is clear that this Government does not even believe in itself when it comes to addressing the housing crisis, doubling down on failure with the same policies that we know do not work, dusting off old policy measures that have already demonstrably failed. Where is the emergency response? Where is the change in approach? Where is the acknowledgement that your approach does not work?

The Taoiseach: They are great old slogans. Dusting down the old policies: it is all just rhetoric and jargon.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Reducing apartment standards is dusting off an old policy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy, it is not a back and forth.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It will not suffice.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has had her opportunity.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is saying we keep doing the same thing. We have built over 50,000 social homes, or delivered over 50,000. The new plan will deliver 72,000. That is substance.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Why is the Taoiseach not doing an emergency eviction ban?

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: That is building houses. You are not leader yet, Deputy.

A Deputy: Stop changing the subject.

The Taoiseach: That is real substance. We are building houses. We need to build more and build them as fast as we possibly can.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Where is the emergency response to more than 5,000 homeless children?

The Taoiseach: That is our approach. It is something I initiated back in 2020. We have resurrected social house building in this country through the local authorities and approved housing bodies. We have also leased and acquired housing for the social housing portfolio.

Deputy Rory Hearne: At least acknowledge the Government's failure.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: We need to develop affordable housing as well. We all know we need to get to 50,000 per annum overall in terms of house building and 60,000 if we can. That is the answer to it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Government can stop families from being homeless now.

The Taoiseach: We are intervening and have been intervening all of the time. Local authorities are intervening all of the time-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is a disaster.

The Taoiseach: ----- and exiting families from emergency accommodation.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It has doubled in five years.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The N24 national primary road is a vital economic and social corridor across south Tipperary. It is also of strategic regional importance, running as it does from Limerick to south Tipperary and on to Kilkenny, Waterford and the port of Rosslare. An upgrade to motorway status is essential and urgent. Tipperary town, Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir are choked with traffic and are crying out for bypasses along this route. This road project is in two sections, consisting of a western section from Cahir to Limerick Junction-Oola and an eastern section from Cahir to Waterford.

My first meeting with the Ministers and officials on the Tipperary town bypass and the eastern route was over 20 years ago in the offices of Tipperary Urban District Council at Dan Breen House. Thankfully, this section has progressed, with design commencing eventually in 2019. Phase 3 of that development - final design and evaluation - is due for completion early next year. Tipperary County Council, the lead authority on this section, needs funding in 2026 to take this project to oral hearing and adjudication with a view to commencing construction in late 2027.

Unfortunately, the eastern section from Cahir to Waterford has not progressed. It is crucial for the two Tipperary towns of Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir. The Clonmel inner relief road, or the Frank Drohan Road as it is known, is effectively a car park for large parts of the day, forcing huge volumes of traffic to use an *ad hoc* southern route through the hugely built-up area of the old bridge. Carrick-on-Suir is choked with thousands of vehicles, including all HGVs and vans passing along the Clonmel Road and O'Mahony Avenue and on to the Waterford road, all of which are built-up areas. This project has been suspended twice and is currently stalled due to a lack of funding. The road is essential for road safety reasons as well. It represents about 1% of the road network but 24% of deaths. I ask that funding be continued for the N24 Cahir to Limerick Junction-Oola section in 2026 and that funding be provided in 2026 to resume the design of the N24 Cahir to Waterford project.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I know that a number of Deputies in his constituency, including Deputies Ryan O'Meara and Michael Murphy, have also been focused on this. This is a project we have been endeavouring to progress. I know the last Minister for Transport was probably not as enthusiastic about road construction as others, and the idea was possibly bypasses and so on. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. The Deputy is correct in saying that better roads make for better road safety. That is certainly the case. There is a lot of congestion on that road. We will see what we can do. There is a huge investment programme. Only a number of weeks ago, the Minister announced a sectoral plan for transport under the national development plan. The list of projects is enormous, with huge investment. Obviously, those projects will be staggered and sequenced. The Deputy is asking for funding for the Cahir to Limerick Junction section to be continued in 2026. I would anticipate that that should not be a challenge. Has the Deputy heard to the contrary that it will not be continued? To be fair to the outgoing Minister, work on it was begun. I will go to the Minister and see whether we can see what the story is and whether we can accelerate it.

The Deputy also wants design to start with regard to the Cahir to Waterford section. Again, I will have to go back to the Minister to see where we are in terms of the prioritisation of this project. There is a whole range of projects. Construction inflation has eaten into some of the budgets and that has been a significant factor. Nonetheless, hugely increased allocations are going to road transport and public transport more generally. I would like to think that we should be in a position to spare funding for this road, which is a very important artery, to enable in particular the continuation of the work on the Cahir to Limerick Junction section. I will ask the Minister to come back to me about the Cahir to Waterford section.

Deputy Seamus Healy: In fairness, the Minister has indicated that he hopes to be in a position to continue the funding for the Cahir to Limerick Junction-Oola section in 2026 but he was not able to give the same indication about the Cahir to Waterford section. Funding for the Cahir to Waterford section is crucial for economic, social and road safety reasons. This section is costing about three lives per year. The project has been suspended twice, costing the Exchequer about €10 million. There is significant public frustration with serious traffic congestion in Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir, and 2,500 land holdings have been sterilised. We understand that motorways cannot be built overnight but we do need sufficient funds in 2026 for this stretch of the road to recommence design and, hopefully, commence construction by about 2030.

The Taoiseach: I again thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and confirming that the Minister is relatively positive and optimistic about the continuation of funding for the section from Cahir to Limerick Junction. The Deputy made an important point, which sometimes gets overlooked when it comes to road construction, about the road safety dimension. That is critical. My understanding is that Tipperary County Council is progressing the Cahir to Limerick Junction section in partnership with Limerick County Council. It is being managed by the mid-west national road design office. I understand the Minister has engaged with public representatives about the Cahir to Waterford section. I will talk to the Minister about that. I appreciate the reasons the Deputy raised this matter.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I welcome the acceptance by the Government of the Minister for Health's proposals relating to hospital facilities in the mid-west. These proposals were based on the HIQA report, which stressed patient safety. It said patient safety was central to its proposals, which means time is of the essence in implementing these proposals. We are all concerned about patients. I pay tribute to the staff, who have worked with great dedication and courtesy in UHL in what continue to be very difficult and sometimes intolerable conditions.

It is now proposed that a new building be erected in the vicinity of the Dooradoyle site. Has a site been identified and acquired for that building? When the Minister was asked about this yesterday, she said she could not talk about it due to commercial considerations. Surely there are no commercial considerations in asking whether the site has been acquired, when it will be acquired and whether we will be told when it has been acquired.

It is also proposed that a project management board be established to drive this project forward, which is essential. It has been some time since the HIQA report was issued. Has that management structure been put in place and if not, when will it be put in place?

In view of the urgency of the situation and the fact the safety of patients is central to these recommendations, will the Taoiseach give the House an assurance that sufficient capital will be provided to enable this project to go ahead within the required timescale in view of the fact that the ESRI has projected that over the next 15 years, a further 600 model 4 hospital-type beds will be needed in this region? This is almost double the current capacity of University Hospital Limerick.

As the services are centrally located in Limerick, there is a huge problem with the ambulance service because a very far-outlying area surrounds Limerick, from the west end of Clare up to the very top of Tipperary, etc. As a result of that, we are exposed every day to lurid tales of people waiting five or six hours, or longer, for ambulances. These are people who urgently need to get to hospital. Is it proposed to revamp the ambulance service in conjunction with these new recommendations so that people will not be waiting in those circumstances for any longer?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I know he has been a long-time advocate for health services in the Limerick region, in particular in light of the huge challenges

that have faced acute services in the mid-west. I join him in paying tribute to all the staff working in our hospitals in the mid-west under difficult circumstances.

The Government's decision to support the Minister's memo that was brought to Government this week in respect of the HIQA report and HIQA review into urgent and emergency care capacity in the mid-west region, which the previous Government asked for, will need additional capital. Additional capital will be provided, in the first instance to progress option A. What is interesting is we know that the impacts can be quite dramatic when we get additional capacity. The average number of people waiting on trolleys at University Hospital Limerick has almost halved in the week since the new 96-bed block opened compared with the weeks prior. That 96-bed block that is now open has made a difference, so we want to do a second block at that scale. The sooner that can be done, the better. Enabling works are now under way for the second 96-bed block at UHL. Additional 16- and 66-bed blocks are also in planning for accelerated delivery at the hospital. That will increase capacity at UHL by a total of 306 beds since 2023.

On option B, the Minister has mandated the HSE to secure an available appropriate adjacent site. I do not have the information to hand as to whether it has that site at the moment, but it has the mandate to secure the site. The standard governance structure and the project board will have to be established, as required by the HSE, to explore additional opportunities to decant services away from the main Dooradoyle site. My understanding is the project board has not yet been established, but it will be imminently, once we get the other site. What is happening in other hospital locations is that decanting unnecessary services in an acute hospital environment - including patient records, or it could be outpatients - is working. I have seen it at the Rotunda and other hospitals, where it has had a really transformative impact and created huge space for the essence of what acute care should be all about.

To progress option C, the Minister and the Department will develop a strategic plan for the incremental reconfiguration of and investment in healthcare services in the mid-west region. I heard it said this morning, and I do not want to name people, that this is a very welcome development. I take the Deputy's point about timescale and capital. Subject to the revenues the economy is generating at the moment, we will have an expansive healthcare capital programme over the next number of years. I am confident we can accommodate substantive elements of this in the coming years.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Will the Taoiseach comment on the ambulance service in the area?

Two private hospitals were built in Limerick after the last 96-bed block was commissioned. They were built in two or two and a half years. It took six years, from start to finish, to build the 96-bed unit. It is projected it will take another six years to build the next one. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, has proposals to move on and expedite these large infrastructural projects. Does the Taoiseach envisage those will have an impact, such that that job will be done much more quickly and efficiently than has happened in the past? We wanted to know why two 96-bed units were not built together. We were told that would bring the budget to over €200 million, which would require going over a lot of other barriers and would delay the project. We are worried about that also and about how long this is all going to take.

The Taoiseach: On the ambulances, we want to continue to improve and revamp our ambulance service. It is a national service. It causes a lot of challenges for the public and people generally in trying to understand the methodology or framework governing it. We will continue to engage with the National Ambulance Service, particularly in respect of its manifestation and how it works in the Limerick region.

The issue of critical infrastructure and the initiatives of the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will impact on this because the *esprit de corps* now is not why something can happen but, rather, why it should happen. There have been planning challenges on that site and, probably, there will remain planning challenges in people having different perspectives on it. The Deputy referenced what would be known as the public spending code, and that is being amended. Of course, on another day, people will come to the House and say we spent too much on this or that. All of that means others want to develop the public spending code. There is always a balance here in getting projects through and getting them done, and turning up at the public accounts committee afterwards to explain the additional expenditure, but that is the world we are in.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Two weeks ago, I asked the Taoiseach two questions. I asked him, first of all, whether the Government would vote against Mercosur when the vote comes to the European Council, and I asked him whether he would work with like-minded member states to form a blocking minority against this ruinous deal. He failed to answer either of those questions. I would now like him to make the Government's position clear because the vote is scheduled to take place in Brussels tomorrow. There is a chance of securing a blocking minority. France, Poland and Hungary have stated they will vote against the deal. Italy wants the vote postponed. I want the Taoiseach to be clear at this juncture because it is now time to be straight with people. Will the Government vote against the Mercosur deal at the European Council meeting - yes or no?

The Taoiseach: First of all, there is huge uncertainty as to when that vote will be taken. It was meant to be taken last Friday and was not because, as the Deputy said, a number of countries were anxious that it be postponed. The Deputy referenced Italy and France. The Irish position has been that we have been working with like-minded countries in respect of Mercosur, in terms of----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: To block it.

The Taoiseach: -----first of all making sure there are substantial safeguards, which have happened. The situation has changed since last year. What the Commission has now brought forward is different. That has to be acknowledged. The European Parliament voted for the additional safeguards. We said we would continue to work with like-minded countries on this. We have concerns with this agreement.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: To achieve what?

The Taoiseach: To get the best outcome for Irish farming.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: To vote against it.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, we have 18 Deputies.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I asked the Taoiseach whether he would vote for or against. He has not elucidated a clear response.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I wish the Ceann Comhairle, all her staff and everyone across the House a very happy Christmas.

There is a chronic shortage of pathologists to carry out post-mortem examinations in Ireland and pathologists are withdrawing from the post-mortem service as they are not contractually obliged to provide post-mortems. The Minister for justice will be aware of this due to an internal briefing paper. This Christmas in Limerick, unfortunately, we will have no pathology cover between 23 December and 29 December. Anybody who dies in that period where an autopsy is required will not be able to be buried until the autopsy is complete. This will cause unnecessary additional grief and upset for families. It could delay a funeral by up to ten or 12 days. When will the standing committee established in the Department of justice to examine this issue conclude its work? When will a new model for the service be agreed and implemented?

The Taoiseach: I acknowledge what the Deputy said. There is a challenge here. There is a shortage of pathologists all over Europe. It is a significant challenge. I know the Minister is doing everything possible to try to deal with the situation and the challenges that have arisen from this. He will continue to use every lever that can be used to ensure we can cover and provide the service that is required.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Yesterday, the Taoiseach did not answer my party leader, Holly Cairns, on whether an emergency winter payment for people with disabilities would be provided. Instead, he said the Government wanted to embed permanent changes to payments, but it has not done that either. The Government has instead slashed the income of some of the most vulnerable people in this country by €1,400 before those permanent supports were ready.

It has also plunged more disabled people into poverty to face a grim Christmas. They are already the cohort with among the highest deprivation and poverty rates in the country and among the lowest employment rates in the developed world. It is not too late to admit this was wrong and to do something about it, so I will ask again. Will the Government introduce an emergency €400 winter payment for disabled people and commit to introducing a permanent cost-of-disability payment in the new year?

The Taoiseach: I did answer that question yesterday. There seems to be a standard line from the Deputy's party spokespeople that their first line is, "You never answered the question I asked you." The bottom line, which I have been very clear about, is that the once-off payments we did during the Ukraine-Russia war-----

Deputy Eoin Hayes: So, he is ruling it out.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not a back and forth, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Will the Deputy let me speak, please? It is not fiscally sustainable that we would have €3 billion to €4 billion every year in once-off payments across the board on needy situations. We are concentrating on embedded change in terms of domiciliary care going up by €20 per month, a 20% increase in disability services and the largest ever increase in the threshold governing the carer's allowance. That is real change that will last and sustain.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: This will be real change.

The Taoiseach: On the cost of disability, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Dara Calleary, is working with organisations to do the due diligence and the hard work of formulating an approach for a cost of disability, which will inform next year's budget. I made all of that clear yesterday.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Children's disability network teams of health and social care professionals provide services to children and young people aged 18 with complex needs. These interdisciplinary teams include professionals like occupational therapists, psychologists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, dieticians and social workers. The objectives of the teams are to support a child's development, well-being and participation in family and community life on the basis of an individual family support plan. All of these are necessary and essential. However, the teams based in Clonmel are almost non-existent and the service is almost non-existent. There is no occupational therapist, no psychologist, no physiotherapist and no dietician on the team. These children are obviously being failed by the HSE and the Government. Can the Taoiseach give any indication as to when the vacancies on these teams will be filled and the service provided?

The Taoiseach: There has been a national recruitment campaign in respect of CDNTs. The vacancies have reduced significantly but there are still vacancies, and I acknowledge that. Parallel with that, we are developing the school therapy service, which will help in time when special schools in particular will have multidisciplinary teams as a result of that initiative. We have provided an additional €20 million this year in terms of people accessing private services and we have also continued to allocate for additional recruitment of therapists to the CDNTs.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Fox overpopulation devastates rural Ireland. Lambs and chickens are torn apart in a horrific fashion leaving farmers traumatised and livelihoods at risk. While the Bill frames hunting as cruel, unchecked fox population often inflicts far greater cruelty to the livestock population. Hunting is often the only humane way to flush foxes from an area. If we ban this particular issue, it may push farmers into more difficult ways in terms of poisoning, snarls and so on. We need to protect farmers in rural Ireland, and I believe we should not support the Bill that will force farmers into other ways. There is a significant issue of overpopulation of foxes.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): We have had a two-hour debate on the proposed Bill to ban fox hunting this morning. I have clearly outlined that the Government intends to oppose that Bill.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I have a really important question to ask the Taoiseach on behalf of all the parents, carers and children across Ireland, especially my two children at home in Meath, Liam and Hannah. We have had lots of special and important visitors to Ireland throughout 2025 but our most important one will arrive here on 24 December, Christmas Eve. I would like the Taoiseach's personal assurances that our airspace will be clear for Santa, Rudolph and all of his reindeer to allow them to deliver all the well-deserved presents for the boys and girls in County Meath and across Ireland.

The Taoiseach: I assure the Deputy that I have had consultations with the Minister for Transport, Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Sean Canney, and Santa has complete clearance in Irish airspace on that critical timeline the Deputy has outlined. Liam and Hannah can rest assured that he will arrive on time and with an abundance of toys and so forth for the children of the nation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Well done, Deputy Dempsey.

Deputy Colm Burke: The vacant property grant was introduced quite some time ago but changes were made in September 2025 where a charge is now required to be registered by the local authority. As a result, there is now a huge number of people for whom the grant will not be paid before 31 December. In particular, I am talking about property in the Cork City Council area. A mortgage and deed of charge have to be submitted to the council, which has to lodge it for registration and a grant will not be paid out until a dealing number is issued. No process has been put in place to expedite the payment of the grant. We now have people who borrowed money to buy property and to have it renovated and brought into use and they are now not able to borrow any more money. As the grant has not been paid out, builders have not been paid and it is now causing a huge problem in the building industry and for the people who took the risk of buying the properties.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister for housing in respect of that. I will also ask the city council if anything can be done about that specific issue.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Taoiseach is familiar with Cork Educate Together Secondary School. It is a school, which should be in our constituency, but since 2018 it has been based in the building of Griffith College on the north side of the city. In that temporary location, it has no access to PE facilities. Its special education facilities are severely constrained and a lot of their 400 students have to get buses across the city. It has a hard deadline in terms of its current location of September 2027 and it has to be out of there by then. Planning was granted in May 2024 but still the tender has not been released. Will the Taoiseach give us an update as to when the tender will be released because the school is now working against a hard deadline, and it is hard to know what will happen at that stage?

The Taoiseach: I agree that this permanent school building for Cork Educate Together Secondary School is urgently required. It will be a new 600-pupil post-primary school building and accommodation, including classrooms for children with special educational needs at a greenfield site in Douglas in Cork. The project has planning permission, as the Deputy has said. The Department officials and external project management consultants are currently reviewing the works and site-specific requirements to ensure the tender documents are up to date. Once that is complete, it will then go to tender stage. I will speak to the Minister to make sure we can accelerate that.

Deputy Albert Dolan: The increase in capital funding for school building projects is absolutely vital and is reflected in the NDP. In Galway East and across the country it is also vital that we remember smaller secondary schools that play a crucial role in rural areas. I talk specifically about Coláiste an Chreagáin in Mountbellew. It has over 120 pupils and operates out of a historic structure. It is truly a fantastic place, and I will be visiting it this week. It has an application at the moment for an extension for two extra classrooms. I met with the GRET, and this is a project it is keen to see progress. I ask that this Government will continue to support smaller secondary schools in rural locations that play a huge role for those hinterlands.

The Taoiseach: Aontaím leis an Teachta. I agree with the Deputy. I am a former Minister for Education. There are always specific needs in rural Ireland for education, be it primary or second level schools. I am familiar with that college. I will talk to the Minister about it, particularly the additional classrooms. This gives choice. It helps in terms of commuting. Very often, even though there are sometimes limitations with a curriculum, if there is an ETB you can give resources through a variety of mechanisms, and the smaller schools can be a wonderful, successful and effective education and learning environment.

1 o'clock

I will pursue that with the Minister on the Deputy's behalf.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I heard the Taoiseach speaking earlier about the 180 precious lives lost on Irish roads so far this year. Motorcycle deaths are the highest in more than 20 years. As policymakers and legislators, we have to do more. I am currently working on an action plan and working closely with road victim advocacy groups. Over the next four years during the lifetime of this Government, 500 more lives will be lost. A key priority is the strengthening of our roads policing unit. Back in 2009, that unit stood close to 1,050. We have 1 million extra vehicles on Irish roads and that unit currently stands at 633.

I appeal to the Taoiseach to act decisively on this, to engage with the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Garda Commissioner to strengthen our roads policing unit.

The Taoiseach: Without question, we are numbed and shocked at the loss of life on our roads in recent weeks. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of those who have tragically passed, as well as with our first responders who do extraordinary work in very difficult and sad circumstances.

As I said earlier, the policing response is increasing, particularly with the throughput of gardaí in Templemore, which is at its highest for quite some time. As gardaí come through,

there will be more added to that policing unit. However, the broader Garda force has also been tasked with road policing duties. It is a critical issue and the Garda Commissioner and gardaí have a specific programme from 1 December to 5 January, in respect of the Christmas period, on road safety and road policing. It is a critical issue and we will be adding numbers as they come through Templemore.

Deputy Ann Graves: Fuel poverty is at crisis levels in the State. I see it first-hand in my own constituency in Fingal East, particularly among the elder generations who are having to choose between heating and eating. I met a woman in her 70s from Malahide the other day who has worked her entire life. She spends her days walking around shopping centres to try to get some heat. It is absolutely appalling. She has changed her diet and is living on instant Cup A Soups because she cannot afford to eat. When it comes to the choice on blister packs, she is not going to be able to afford that either.

The Taoiseach's Government patted itself on the back for having a surplus of €9 billion and that surplus has come at a terrible cost. People are literally freezing in their homes. The Government has to release the purse strings to give the disabled a once-off payment and give our elderly people the financial assistance they need to heat their homes properly.

The Taoiseach: The surplus is because of corporation tax and other taxes, not because of any cutback here. We have actually increased the fuel allowance and the number of people entitled to receive the fuel allowance. It is now supporting about 417,000 households and will cost about €400 million, which is money well spent. In addition, the household benefits package for a lot of elderly people comprises, as the Deputy will know, the likes of the gas or electricity allowance, the free TV licence and so on. The retrofit programme has also been particularly impactful in terms of the number of households that have benefited from that. It is increasing significantly every year, which reduces energy costs. I acknowledge that there are challenges and pressures on people but we have focused and targeted our resources on the low-income groups, as opposed to having universal energy credits this time, which would have spread money to those on higher incomes. We wanted to focus on the elderly and those on low incomes.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I wish to raise TB outbreaks in Kerry. We are being ravaged, especially in east Kerry. The issue many farmers are raising with me is an increase to the ceiling cap for compensation, which is limited to €3,000 at present. They fear for their financial future because they will not be able to buy back in cows for that, especially the number of high bred dairy cows and suckler cows that will cost much more to replace. Farmers are asking if something can be done to raise that ceiling. I am sorry the Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, is gone but I know he was here all morning.

The other question is there are a number of people now-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Healy Rae. It is only one question.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----who come in who have not received their ACRES payment yet. I hope there will not be a repetition of what happened this year.

The Taoiseach: The spread of TB is a very serious issue. As the Deputy knows, the Minister recently announced a major initiative in respect of the bovine TB action plan addressing bovine TB in Ireland. There were five measures in that plan, underpinned by 30 actions on the specific issue of compensation and the rate increase. This has continued to increase every year. The cost of the TB programme in 2024 totalled €101 million, which was 34% up on 2023, and 2025 will be higher again. That is because of increased disease levels but it is an additional cost on the programme. I will talk to the Minister in respect of the specific issue of the ceiling cap for compensation but the bulk of resources have gone towards managing the disease and trying to resource the management of the disease.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I have been ringing alarm bells for several years in relation to coastal erosion in Portrane. Last week during Storm Bram, some families lost 5 m of garden in just a four-hour period. They simply cannot wait around any longer for the planning process, working groups or task forces. They are at risk of losing their homes and they need help. We are looking at potentially hundreds of families being homeless without a swift response from Government.

This Dáil term, I contacted the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who knows the issue well and Ministers of State, Deputies Dooley and Moran, who in the past has been a good friend to Portrane, but we have seen no action. Any permanent solution is a minimum of three years away. My colleague Councillor Corina Johnson and I are pleading with the Taoiseach to get the relevant Ministers around the table and up to Portrane and to please deliver emergency measures to protect the community.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a critical and acute issue. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, visited Portrane yesterday, so he is well aware of this. We will take any measures we can to help and I will talk to the Minister in respect of this. The Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, is also very concerned about this and is in consultations with the Minister of State.

Coastal erosion is a growing issue and I accept that adaptation needs greater focus. We asked prior to the NDP being developed that more generally adaptation in the country require very prompt and necessary comprehensive treatment into the future, and that includes coastal erosion.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The special leave with pay scheme for healthcare workers with long Covid is going to end in two weeks' time unless the Taoiseach intervenes. This scheme is in place for a small group of healthcare workers - the majority being women - many of whom got badly infected while at work at the height of the Covid pandemic, when the rest of us were at home and long before PPE and vaccines. These workers got very sick with long Covid as a result and many are physically unable to return to work. Today, the health committee I chaired agreed to write to the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to ask her to extend the scheme for six months to allow the Department of Social Protection to introduce an occupational injury scheme, as other EU countries have done.

Will the Taoiseach support the committee's call or will he let these workers face a financial cliff edge on New Year's Eve, with huge consequences for them and their families, including

the possibility of losing their homes? They need an intervention today and they need it from the Taoiseach to extend this scheme to give them financial certainty while this issue is resolved once and for all.

The Taoiseach: I am familiar with the issue and have met with a number of the workers involved on the last occasion. The Labour Court made recommendations, and we extended it until Christmas. At some stage, some resolution of this has to happen on a sustainable basis. I will talk to the Minister for Health and other Ministers to see what is possible.

Deputy John McGuinness: A Kilkenny family adopted their son at three years of age and he is now 14. In that short time, he has been in nine different placements. He is high dependency and his behaviours are unmanageable. He has been taken back into the care of the State and Tusla have him in a hotel room where the appropriate care is not being given. I ask that some action be taken by Tusla to remedy this situation.

I raised another case - the Jones case - previously. There was no action on that and in spite of meeting the chief executive officer of Tusla, I have had absolutely no response. Foster carers and kids are in real difficulty. I understand that there could be 200 waiting for placements and nothing is happening. It just cannot go on. How can a child be put in a hotel?

Lastly, I asked that someone would arrange a meeting with Down Syndrome Kilkenny. That has not happened either.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is two questions, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: That was only last week.

Deputy John McGuinness: I did.

The Taoiseach: I will make two comments. We met with Tusla officials recently at a Cabinet subcommittee. Tusla is dealing with an enormous number of cases at the moment and that continues to grow for a variety of factors. It is not fair to say that nothing is being done. Services are increasing but not at the level to match the increasing need and demand. What is worrying is the complexity of need in children who Tusla engage with. I do not have specifics of the case, so I will talk to Tusla in respect of it.

Regarding the meeting with Down Syndrome Kilkenny, I think it was last week that the Deputy asked for that. In fairness, it has been-----

Deputy John McGuinness: Diary permitting.

The Taoiseach: -----very busy. We will organise it but my diary is actually full for the next two months-----

Deputy John McGuinness: That is fine.

The Taoiseach: -----but I will find time. I said I would and that is it.

Deputy David Maxwell: I would like to ask about the rationale behind the decision on blister packs that were available through local pharmacies and whether the Taoiseach is aware of the significant impact this is having on patients in counties Cavan and Monaghan and around the country. They are used selectively for patients with dementia or cognitive impairment, intellectual disabilities, significant physical or dexterity impairment, multiple chronic conditions and polypharmacy. Blister packs are not a convenience; they are a vital safety measure that supports medication adherence, independence and reduces the risk of hospitalisations. Evidence consistently shows that the unintentional non-adherence, for example, a person forgetting their dose, etc., worsens the disease, increases hospital admissions, and leads to higher health care costs. Vulnerable groups, particularly older adults, people with dementia and those on multiple medicines are at the highest risk. Community pharmacists are uniquely placed to mitigate this risk. They will support targeted, assessed use, clear eligibility criteria, ongoing review of governance and alignment with patient safety guidelines. Will the Taoiseach outline what consultations took place? I know the decision has been deferred but will he commit to reviewing this decision as a matter of urgency to ensure that vulnerable patients are not put at risk?

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Health has explained this. No formal decision was taken by Government or by the Minister in respect of blister packs. The Minister has made the point that there have been different practices in different pharmacies across the country. Some did not charge at all. It is my understanding that some charged very minor rates such as €5 or €10. However, others charged using another scheme, which, according to the HSE, was not allowable and should not have been used. The Minister is engaging with the various representative bodies to see what workable solution can be devised. It is not quite as it has been presented and the Minister has clarified that. We are conscious of the need and that some cohorts of patients are in greater need than others.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I want to raise the issue of the neolithic passage tombs at Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath. These have some of the most beautiful examples of neolithic art in Ireland but remain closed to the public. I have dealt with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, and now the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, on this. We do not seem to be getting anywhere. Fair play to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran; he is babysitting today. Maybe he can get him a full-time job at that. I have written on three occasions to the Minister of State who has responsibility for the OPW urging prompt action to secure the necessary works at Cairn T. After no response, I submitted a parliamentary question seeking accountability and a clear timeline, yet the reply I received concerns what many already feared. Stabilisation works require ministerial consent and even then the reopening hinges on a future date that is not defined. The public will not be able to access the interior of Cairn T in 2026 and the definitive timeline remains up in the air, with the site having been closed to the public since 2018. That is coming up on eight years now. I ask the three Ministers of State who have come and gone since I first raised this to honour their responsibilities, act with urgency and give Cairn T the urgent care it deserves. We owe it to all who stood on the hill of Loughcrew over the past 5,500 years. I ask for nothing less than action and a clear plan to once again open one Meath's biggest and best attractions.

The Taoiseach: Generally speaking, in terms of archaeological sites and national parks, we have put a lot of investment into Meath in recent years, and we will continue to do so. I note that the Deputy has been engaging with various Ministers and the OPW. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, will engage and will get things done. I am confident that we can deal with the issues the Deputy has outlined. With projects of this kind there are challenges but we hear what he is saying and we will come back to him. I have confidence in the Minister of State's capacity to get things done.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: County Clare is the heartland of suckler beef, with 85% of farming in the county being suckler beef-based. I farm myself. We have Hereford, shorthorn and Dexter cattle. It does not sit well with farmers in Clare and other counties in the west that we could enter a Mercosur deal. The type of cattle we raise in the west are pasture-based for seven months or eight months of the year. Then they are housed indoors and fed silage. It a very environmentally friendly way. It goes from field to fork very quickly. The standards are so high, with genomics, Bord Bia and annual TB testing. The standard of beef from the animal, and the care of animal is so high. It does not sit well that we should have to meet these increased standards in terms of reducing our greenhouse gases, yet there could be a possibility of felling rainforest and bringing in an inferior animal from Brazil or other parts of South America as part of Mercosur. What will the Government be doing? We would like some reassurances.

Finally, I wish the Ceann Comhairle, the staff and Members of the House a very happy Christmas.

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy about the quality of Irish beef and the quality of the Irish food production system. It is one of the highest in the world and certainly very high in the European league table. I understand fully and that is why we have concerns with certain issues in terms of the Mercosur countries and their food production systems, although there have been dramatic changes since Lula da Silva returned to power after Bolsonaro, with deforestation being halved. We have agreed to work with like-minded countries. Additional safeguards have been put in place compared to where it was a year ago, and no vote has been taken. It is very uncertain whether any will be taken this year. As we speak, about 200,000 tonnes are imported into Europe under existing arrangements. The change would be 99,000 tonnes of that 200,000 tonnes at a lower tariff entry rate. Meanwhile, Irish exports continue to increase across the board. In beef and dairy in particular, we are at record high levels. We are penetrating new markets as well and we will continue to work on that.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.18 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.18 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.18 p.m. and resumed at 2.18 p.m.

Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am delighted to be here to introduce the Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill to this House. This is a short Bill with a single purpose. That purpose is to ban the sale of disposable electronic cigarettes or vapes. Like all public representatives, I regularly hear from parents, teachers and coaches who are concerned about the impact that vapes and nicotine use are having on children's health. The sight of discarded vapes littering our towns and villages is also a huge problem. Ireland has a long and proud history of tackling the public health issues caused by tobacco, dating back to our world-famous indoor smoking ban, and this Bill will continue that tradition. The Bill will remove these lower priced products from shops, which is important in making vapes less attractive and available to children. This measure will also address the environmental issues caused by the disposal of these products. The main health risk of vapes for our children is that the use of nicotine may become an addiction, which could lead to tobacco smoking and the many health harms that causes. For our young people, these products do nothing more than deliver nicotine, an addictive drug. In 2020 our Health Research Board found that adolescents who vape are more likely to smoke. Some 5% of our children smoke tobacco. Our goal is that that figure should be zero. This Bill is one of a whole suite of measures to address youth use of nicotine products.

The foundational law on these products is our 2016 regulations which implemented the EU tobacco products directive. Those regulations require e-cigarette packaging to contain health warnings. They also provide for mandatory safety and quality requirements for e-cigarettes and refill containers. The regulations oblige manufacturers or importers of these products to notify the Health Service Executive of all products they place on the market. They also prohibit the advertising of e-cigarettes on television, on radio, online and in print.

Today's Bill also builds on the work done in our 2023 law, the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Act, and I commend my former colleague Stephen Donnelly on his work in this area. The 2023 Act banned the sale of vapes to under-18s and further restricted advertising rules. We want to limit our children's exposure to messages that normalise or glamorise vapes. Our 2023 Act also reduced the places where vapes can be bought, with their sale through self-service vending machines, as well as on temporary premises or at events which are aimed mainly at children, banned since September. We want to break the link between these products and events or activities our young people enjoy.

The new licensing system for the sale of vapes and tobacco products is designed to reflect the seriousness of these products and to help the enforcement of the law around them. It will do so by providing the national environmental health service of the HSE with up-to-date information on the businesses in operation. That requirement will come into effect for all retailers of these products in February next year. It will make Ireland one of the few countries in Europe to require an annual licence to sell these products. These are some of the measures already in place. The Minister for Health is also finalising comprehensive law on other aspects of nicotine-inhaling products and other tobacco products.

The public health (tobacco products and nicotine-inhaling products) (amendment) Bill is very nearly completed. On 18 November the Government added to it measures on newer products such as nicotine pouches. These measures should be finalised early next year and they will be in addition to the comprehensive measures on vapes already in that Bill. It is very important that products such as nicotine pouches are addressed by legislation now. We saw how quickly vapes increased in use among young people and we do not want the same thing to

happen with other nicotine products, so it is important we address these newer products more quickly in the knowledge that they are always evolving so quickly.

That Bill will restrict the colours and imagery on the packaging of vapes and on the devices themselves to make them less attractive to our children. It will also ban devices resembling or functioning vapes as other products such as toys or games. This is to ensure that the Irish market does not see these products become multi-use devices with features that are aimed to attract our children. It will also restrict the flavours available and ban all flavour descriptors and language other than basic flavour names. This is to eliminate the marketing potential of the use of child-friendly flavour names. Finally, the Bill will ban the point-of-sale display and advertising of these products in everyday supermarkets and shops in order that our children are not exposed to these products in everyday life.

I think we can all understand how a child might be attracted to vapes, with their colourful appearance, attractive flavours and flavour names and the variety on display in our ordinary grocery shops and newsagents. The new law will ensure that the visible presence of these products is reduced and that it is made clear that these products are not the same as ordinary groceries. Some of the statistics on the use of vapes by children are stark. The 2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study found that 19% of 12-to-17-year-old children have used a vape and 13% reported that they had used one in the past 30 days. These numbers are unacceptable, and one of my priorities as Minister of State with responsibility for public health is to take whatever action we can to bring those down to zero. It is important to note that these responses date from before the ban on their sale to minors, so that number is likely to fall, and I look forward to today's Bill reducing those numbers even further.

I will now take the House through the Bill to outline the content of each section. Part 1 relates to preliminary and general matters and contains sections 1 to 8. Section 1 provides for the Short Title of the Bill and for the commencement of its sections. Section 2 is the definition section and sets out the category of products that will be prohibited from sale under this Bill. It provides that a vape must be both refillable and rechargeable, or be otherwise designed and intended to be reused, to avoid the ban. Section 3 ensures that the Bill will not apply to medical devices, accessories for a medical device or medicinal products. Section 4 is a standard section providing for the residence of a body corporate or unincorporated persons. Section 5 provides power for the Minister for Health to make regulations as needed. It also provides that any regulations must be laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas. Section 6 is a standard section providing for the service of documents. Section 7 provides for a six-month transition period from the commencement of the prohibition. This gives our supermarkets, convenience stores, specialist shops and others that sell these products six months to make whatever business arrangements are necessary to comply with this prohibition. Section 8 is a standard section on expenses.

Part 2 relates to the prohibition on single-use vapes and its enforcement and contains sections 9 to 13. Section 9 sets out the prohibition on the retail sale of single-use vapes in the State. It provides that it is an offence for any person to contravene it. Section 10 provides for the appointment of authorised officers for ensuring compliance with this Act. The Act will be enforced by our national environmental health service, the body that enforces the rest of our tobacco control and related law.

Section 11 is a standard section that provides for the indemnification of authorised officers. Section 12 provides for the powers of our environmental health officers to ensure compliance with the Act. This includes powers to enter a premises if there are reasonable grounds to believe that vapes will be found there or documents or other records relating to vapes; to inspect such premises and take copies of documents or records; to remove and detain any vape, or component of a vape, or any documents or records, where the officer has reasonable cause to suspect that there has been a contravention of this Act; and to require any person to provide relevant information, including for the purposes of ascertaining the ownership of websites. Section 13 provides for a prohibition notice in the case of contravention of section 9. A prohibition notice can direct a person that the contravention should cease immediately, require a single-use vape to be withdrawn or recalled from the market, or require that a single-use vape be disposed of or destroyed. The Bill provides for an appeal against a prohibition notice to the District Court within seven days. It also provides that if a prohibition notice has been served, but the contravention continues, the national environmental health service can apply for a High Court order to prohibit that continuation.

Part 3 is on penalties and miscellaneous provisions. It covers sections 14 to 20, inclusive. Section 14 provides for penalties for first and subsequent offences under the Act. A person guilty of an offence under the Act is liable for a first offence to a fine of up to €4,000, or to imprisonment for a term of up to six months, or to both. For any subsequent offence a guilty person is liable to a fine of up to €5,000, or to imprisonment for a term of up to 12 months, or to both. Section 15 is a standard provision on defences for offences under the Act. Section 16 is a standard section that provides for the liability of officers of a corporate body in the case of an offence by that corporate body. Section 17 allows the national environmental health service of the HSE to bring proceedings for an offence under this Act. In addition, it provides that on conviction, the court can order the person convicted to pay the costs and expenses incurred in relation to the investigation, detection and prosecution of the offence. Section 18 provides that offences may be prosecuted up to 12 months after being committed. Section 19 provides for an offence of providing false or misleading information in purported compliance with this Act. Section 20 provides for a process of disclosure which includes protections against the sharing of information that is legally privileged.

It is important to say that this legislation is about prevention. By banning single-use vapes, we are taking further action to protect young people from nicotine addiction and to prevent a new generation from becoming dependent on these products. Single-use vapes are designed to be cheap, attractive and easy to use. They contribute to the normalisation of nicotine use and pose significant environmental and public health risks. This Bill prioritises the protection of children and young people from these harmful and addictive substances. I look forward to working with Deputies to progress this Bill through the Oireachtas. I know it is an issue that all public representatives are concerned about. I hope they will work with me on this issue. This is about protecting health and well-being, particularly for our children. I commend this Bill to this House.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Bill proposes to ban single-use vapes and creates a framework to achieve this. The ban will be in effect within six months of the commencement of section 7 of the Act, as the Minister said. I support this Bill because it is simple in what it seeks to achieve, which is to ban single-use vapes. I will offer my opinion on, and a critique of, the

Government's wider approach to this issue. I will first talk about single-use vapes. We are already seeing the industry attempting to get around these measures. We have seen that in Britain where vapes have become rechargeable, even though they are still single use. There are at all times attempts by industry to circumvent the Act. This is the problem. We have a Government that has never got ahead of this problem and has taken a piecemeal approach.

I was a member of the Oireachtas health committee when the original Bill on vaping came before it. We raised issues about single-use vapes, flavouring, advertising and other issues. No such measures were included in the Bill that was before us at the time. We were told that a parallel Bill was being worked on. Ever since, the legislation has not been satisfactory and we have seen the piecemeal approach. All the while, the industry is watching and trying to get ahead of the Government, which is not too difficult, given its piecemeal approach. We in the Oireachtas need to ensure we are setting regulations in a timely manner, are ahead of the industry and are not always falling behind and playing catch-up. I make that point because it is a reality from my perspective and needs to be said.

We must protect children and limit the impact that vaping has on them. I know, and everybody else in the House knows, that the industry is cleverly targeting coloured and flavoured vapes and packaging at children. This has been going on for far too long. Obviously, bans on advertising are part of the solution. We need to limit flavours. However, I think there is a rush in this House too often to ban everything and not to consider a more balanced approach. I have spoken to many vapers over the course of the past number of years, and particularly in recent months as Bills such as this have come before us. I know there are different opinions as to whether vaping is a step down from smoking and whether it is something that is a good aid to act as a replacement for smoking. I think that if somebody who was smoking long term switched to vaping, it would be a better option. I would obviously want a person to neither smoke nor use a vape. That is the ideal scenario. However, we must be grown up and accept that people smoke and use vapes. We must ensure that we take a balanced approach. I do not believe that banning every other flavour and moving to a tobacco-flavoured option is a balanced approach. It could create more problems. I know from talking to people who vape that they would see that approach as over the top and a typical reaction whereby we rush to ban everything rather than listening to people who vape.

My primary concern in relation to everything we do is protecting children and ensuring that by way of controlling sales, advertising, flavouring and packaging, we do everything possible to limit the ability of the industry to target children in the very obvious way it does. Any measures or Parts of a Bill that come before me and do that will have my full support and that of my party. I have, as I said, a concern about the lack of consistency from the Government and its lack of coherence. This is the third Bill, as I understand it, in the past three years. We are expecting at least one more Bill and possibly another. There is at least one more Bill coming. It is not the most coherent way to deal with a matter as substantial as this. I will be supporting this Bill because it is clear and simple in what it does. I would, however, caution the Government and the Minister of State by saying that we must watch out because the industry is already trying to get ahead of this. It is looking at laws such as this and finding ways around them. That is unacceptable. We must ensure that laws can be changed quickly if they need to be, by way of amendments, to ensure that we stay ahead of any attempt to circumvent the intent of this Bill and do not fall behind.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill from my perspective as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on education and youth. Sinn Féin supports a ban on single-use vapes. We have called for a ban for years. They are an environmental scourge and a public health concern. Their proliferation has been a testament to regulatory failure.

While we support this specific measure, we must criticise the Government's entire approach to this issue. The Bill in isolation is akin to using a plaster to treat a major wound. It is emblematic of a reactive, piecemeal and painfully slow strategy that is constantly years behind the curve.

My primary concern is the deliberate and cynical targeting of young people by this industry. All we have to do is to open our eyes and look at these products and how they are promoted.

We can see it clearly. This is a campaign of attraction aimed at children and teenagers. We are not talking about subtle marketing. We are talking about a full-spectrum assault on young senses. Vapes come in flavours that belong in a sweet shop like bubblegum, tutti-frutti, or ice cream sundae. They are packaged in lurid, neon colours with designs that would not look out of place on a gaming console or toy. They are small, sleek and discreet. This is not by accident, it is by design. It is the playbook of big tobacco repackaged for a new generation. They are creating a gateway, hooking young people on nicotine with a product that feels harmless, fashionable and sweet. It is working. Talk to any teacher, parent or youth worker and they will describe the alarming prevalence among young people. Young people who have never touched a cigarette are now addicted to nicotine, believing they are inhaling harmless water vapour, not a cocktail of chemicals whose long-term effects we are only beginning to understand.

This Bill bans one type of product, the single-use vape. What about the reusable vapes that come in those same child-friendly flavours and packages? What about the online advertising that still finds its way to young eyes? What about the retailers who, despite the law, continue to sell to minors? The Government's approach of addressing this issue one Bill at a time every year or so is failing our young people. We do not need another piecemeal intervention in 2026 and another in 2027 and so on. We need modern, comprehensive and dynamic legislation now. We need to fairly examine and then implement strict regulations on flavourings and packaging to break this direct marketing line to children. As Deputy Cullinane has said and as some have suggested, this does not mean restricting flavours to tobacco only. That would be excessive and counter-productive for adult smokers seeking a less harmful alternative. It does mean banning the clearly child-oriented flavours and garish toy-like packaging that serves no public health purpose.

Public policy must be balanced. It must ensure that vaping remains a route out of smoking for adults, not an attractive gateway in for non-smoking young people. It must protect our children from predatory commercial practices while supporting informed adult choice. This ban is a step but it is only a small step on a journey the Government is taking at a snail's pace. Our young people need us to run. They need a comprehensive strategy that tackles availability, marketing, flavours and packaging in one coherent, robust piece of legislation. We cannot allow another year to pass when a new generation is lured into nicotine addiction by flavours of bubblegum, rainbows, unicorns and whatever you are having yourself. Sinn Féin will support this Bill but we demand the Government follows it immediately with the comprehensive action our children deserve. Enough with this piecemeal approach. Let us protect our young people.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I am glad this Bill is being brought forward today and I welcome the ban on single-use vapes. Vapes are something that we really need to get a grip on. I also agree that unfortunately, the Government is playing catch-up. Selling to under-18s is still continuing. The HSE is not carrying out enough inspections, and convictions for the sale of vapes to children and young people are still extremely low. We only need to open our eyes as we walk around our constituencies and communities to see children and young people openly vaping on their way to school and home from school, and in places where young people hang around. It is deeply worrying. These products should not be in the hands of children. Investigations into vape shops reveal widespread non-compliance, with one Dublin probe finding illegal sales at 13 out of the 16 stores visited. The HSE found that 20% of retailers failed to meet age-restricted sales requirements, leading to thousands of vape seizures and closure orders against dozens of premises. Even the scale and number of shops where they are being sold pales into insignificance compared to the problem we are seeing with vapes. *The Journal* did an undercover survey and found illegal vapes that breach EU rules on warnings, nicotine and tank size were being sold at 80% of the places they went to. Those were not even within EU rules. It is just shocking. We have no idea what these people are ingesting.

There is evidence that vapes can have a real impact on reducing cigarette use and can help people to come off cigarettes. Of course that is really welcome. It is the way they are being marketed, produced, sold and targeted that is of real concern to anybody in the community. I know of people who have never smoked or touched a cigarette in their life and are now vaping to beat the band. It is just shocking that there is now this method, which is sold and marketed as described earlier, with all the different flavours and colours. It is marketed at people to get them hooked on nicotine, pure and simple. The only purpose of vapes is to get people hooked into nicotine. That is of real concern. I was just doing some research and noticed the chemicals that are in there such as formaldehyde, carcinogens, leading to lung scarring, heart disease, neurological issues and obviously addiction to nicotine. That is in the legal stuff. That is what we know in terms of the legal vapes. The illegal ones are absolutely frightening.

The last thing I will touch on is the environmental piece. It is addressed in the Bill which is really welcome. I am a volunteer with Clonsilla Tidy Towns and the Royal Canal clean-up. We have great groups in Blanchardstown and Castleknock that are helping to clean up the environment. Schools are constantly at it, making people aware of environmental impacts. The environmental impacts of what makes up the vapes are quite worrying. They are just thrown on the streets, in our parks, rivers and lakes. All of that is leaking into our environment.

I welcome the Bill. There has to be a far more comprehensive response to vapes. It needs to be quicker. This industry has positive elements in trying to help people come off cigarettes. We can separate that piece to ensure we can keep that in place and help those people. The studies show that it is more effective in helping people to reduce their cigarette use or come off cigarettes than some of the other nicotine replacement products. The downside of it is worse, however. We have to get the balance right. It is clear that those who are producing these vapes are definitely targeting young people. If we can get a grip on that, it would be a really important piece of work for our young people. We have taken major strides in stopping young people from smoking. We need to put the same effort, time and energy into ensuring that people do not just swap and that industry does not use this as an opportunity to say it recognises cigarettes

are bad and dangerous. Most of society views cigarettes now as something that should be in the past. We cannot let vapes become something of the future.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The Labour Party welcomes and supports this Bill to ban single-use vapes. We also want to make it clear that this is one small part of an overall jigsaw that is required in a public health and environmental response to vaping.

There has been an explosion in the number of people vaping over the past decade. There are figures reporting 7% of adults and 16% of 15- to 16-year-olds are currently vaping. *The Lancet* back in 2023 reported that in 2015, 10% of young people were vaping and now that is up to 30%. Any of us walking around our communities can see that with our eyes. Anybody involved in Tidy Towns can tell us what is happening on our streets. That requires a response. I accept the bona fides of vaping in terms of harm reduction and assisting people in smoking cessation. That is true for many adults, but there is also another reality and another clear picture out there that a new dependency has emerged. For us, this is one small piece of the overall public health response that needs to happen. We look forward to the Bill that will regulate advertising. The advertising for nicotine inhaling products is probably an even bigger issue. We also need to make sure that we future-proof the legislation. It might be vapes of a particular type today. We spent a lot of time during the summer talking about HSC vapes. We are now talking about the legal vapes. There will be another product into the future. The reality for us at the moment is that the nicotine industry, because that is who is driving the sale and growth of vapes, are creating a new generation of dependants to effectively generate a profit.

There is emerging evidence from within medicine that there is a high level of correlation between vaping and sleep issues, anxiety, heart and lung damage and toxin exposure. We have heard from some school principals reporting increased irritability among secondary school students. We are still very much in the infancy of vaping. It is going to be a while before we will see the long-term impacts. The critical thing is that we are not waiting around like we did many decades ago with smoking to see what the long-term impacts are. The State needs to respond. Regarding the environmental reasoning behind this Bill, there is a clear environmental purpose to this Bill. A total of 31 million vapes were sold in Ireland last year. Yet just 1.1 million vapes were recycled. Thirty-one million vapes is one third of all electronic devices sold in Ireland. I was shocked when I saw those figures. The reality is that vapes are simply not being recycled. There are clear concerns about the level of awareness out there about how to dispose of the waste. Effectively, this is an electrical good. They are a significant source of litter containing both plastic and lithium-ion batteries. We cannot tolerate the throwing away into general waste of vapes.

There are significant issues here. There is the banning of the single-use vape, but also the compliance with the waste electrical and electronic equipment, WEEE, directive of vapes that can be used repeatedly. While there are those products out there, there are key concerns with regard to the price point of those products, which would bring into question the incentive of any individual to recycle or do something with the vape when they are priced at such a low point. Enforcement is going to be very important now with regards to the ban on the single-use vapes, but also in terms of the appropriate disposal of the multiuse vapes as well.

Regarding the health issue, nicotine is highly addictive and harmful. It has an impact on adolescent brain development. Yet, significant numbers of teenagers and young people are

now vaping. As Deputy Donnelly eloquently said, there are people who never smoked who are now taking up vaping. That has to be a public health concern. We cannot have a new generation - another generation - effectively addicted to nicotine products with all the issues that go by that. There is a certain irony here that there has been longstanding target of Government, which was set back in 2013, to have smoking prevalence at a rate of 5% by this year. The figures are three or four times that at the moment, but we have a target for the reduction of smoking. We do not have anything with regards to vaping. We need to look at that.

Regarding single-use versus the multiuse vapes, the price point is something that we need to look at. We in the Labour Party urge the Minister of State to give serious consideration to minimum pricing, or indeed a taxation. Again, there will be people looking at this who want to give up smoking. They are looking for an alternative and want that help. I accept that they would feel aggrieved when they heard that message, but we have to look at who is taking up vaping who has never smoked a day in their life and wonder how we can tackle some of that as well. We asked a parliamentary question in September as to the Department of Health's initiatives regarding vaping cessation. There is a well-established smoking cessation programme, which is decently funded by the Department, in place now for many years. When we asked the question about somebody who presents who wants to give up vaping, we are told that the Department has no funding in place. That is a concern. This would not require a large amount of money. If we are serious about recognising the health impacts and that significant numbers of young people are taking up vaping, we need to have a vaping cessation programme that may or may not look like the smoking cessation programme. It certainly needs to be developed.

My final message is that we welcome this Bill. We will support the passage of this Bill, but we want to see an awful lot more coming from the Department of Health with regards to vaping. To be frank about it, the Department is hugely behind the curve. We worry about industry pressure on the Department given the very slow pace of bringing initiatives to the Dáil and Seanad on vaping. The crystal clear thing has to be that we recognise that vaping is a significant issue now in our society both in health and environmental terms. The Government needs to get to grip with it.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I certainly welcome this legislation. Vaping is both a public health and an environmental scourge. Many Tidy Towns groups are insisting that we get rid of these disposable vapes and the litter associated with them as quickly as possible. I want to focus on the public health elements of this legislation. Enforcement is critical and that we ensure when we introduce this legislation that we can enforce it. I hope there will be learnings from the experience in the United States where the US Food and Drug Administration has tried to address this issue, but instead has been dealt a blow because of a wave of unregulated products arriving in from China. I want to know that when the legislation is introduced that there will be significant levels of enforcement.

My concern around that relates to the continued sale of nicotine inhaling products to young people. I asked a parliamentary question last month about the number of inspections that are taking place and the number of test purchases where a nicotine inhaling product was sold to a child. In 2024, there were only 223 inspections of which 40 were where a product was sold to a child. So far to the end of October this year, of 224 inspections 51 were found to be selling

to children. In other words, at present 20% of vape shops investigated - remember it is only the ones that have been investigated - are already flouting the law specifically regarding sale to children. There are not enough inspections taking place. I want to hear from the Minister of State about how we are going to ensure that this legislation and the previous legislation will be enforced. The industry is already fighting back on this.

3 o'clock

It is organising a campaign and, quite frankly, it is spreading information. The industry representative bodies need to be held to account. They need to tell us why 20% of their members are continuing to sell these products to children.

From a World Health Organization report published in October of this year, we know that Ireland has the fifth highest rate of e-cigarette use among 85 countries. It was discovered that 11.2% of the population vaped last year. Quite frighteningly, it is now the case that, on average, children are nine times more likely to vape than adults. One of the concerns I have is that many schools and youth groups have come to me and talked about young people and children who have never smoked taking up vaping. As the Minister of State will know, I raised this in the Seanad before coming in here. I really worry that this issue is not being taken sufficiently seriously.

I ask the Minister of State to consider taking amendments on Committee Stage with regard to banning flavourings and colours and restricting advertising. We have been talking about introducing this legislation for far too long. This Bill is before the House. I ask the Department to bring forward the necessary amendments on Committee Stage. I am quite certain they would get cross-party support. I cannot stress enough how serious this issue is. It is a real public health emergency. If you talk to anybody engaged in health in this space, they will tell you they want this action taken quickly and they want enforcement. I know the Minister of State is quite determined when she gets her teeth into something. I ask her to take on board the proposal for amendments on Committee Stage and to respond as to how this legislation will be enforced.

Deputy Barry Ward: I welcome this Bill. It is necessary and it is very important that we, as the Legislature, address the environmental impacts of disposable vapes. They are everywhere. Everybody knows that. They see them, particularly in town centres. They are even seen next to bins. They somehow do not seem to find their way into the bins but are littered around them. Those horrible stickers are put onto the bins as well.

I welcome any move to ban disposable vapes. That is a good thing. However, I also think this Bill misses the point. When we are legislating in relation to vapes, why are we not legislating to deal with the fact that nicotine is being distributed widely? It is a corrosive, addictive and carcinogenic product and we are not doing anything to stop it from being distributed. That is the real missed opportunity. We should be changing the word "tobacco" to "nicotine" in the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts because any product that promotes or delivers nicotine is bad for the population. The same controls that apply to cigarettes should apply to vapes at the very minimum. Not only is this a huge growth industry, as evidenced by the proliferation of shops throughout our towns and villages around the country, but people are now starting vaping without using cigarettes first and we do not know what harm it is doing to them. As other contributors have mentioned, what is worse than that is the number of children

who are vaping. Notwithstanding laws that might be in place, we know that lots and lots of children are doing this and that flavoured vapes are specifically targeted at those children. This Bill does nothing to address that either.

While I welcome the Bill, there is a real missed opportunity to address the actual public health issues that arise from the proliferation of vapes in Ireland. An opportunity has also been missed in not addressing nicotine and the targeting of these products. I do not doubt that the industry would deny children are being targeted, but that is what the flavours are for. Adults may indulge in them, but they are primarily aimed at children.

I will make some other comments about the Bill. In section 9, it creates a criminal offence of selling these products. What astonishes me about that is that nothing appears to have been learned from the many years of application of the Finance Acts in relation to, for example, the sale of tobacco products that have not had tax paid on them and do not have the tax stamp on them. The terminology used in the Finance Acts refers to selling or keeping for sale. The danger with section 9(1) is that it makes an offence of selling these products. It should be an offence to sell them, to keep them for sale or to plan to sell them, where there is evidence to support that. Why allow an out for potential defendants where they are not caught in the act of selling even though they might have a back room full of these products? That does not mean they should not be liable to prosecution under section 9.

Section 17 provides for the HSE to be able to recoup its expenses. This is something I associate much more with regulatory offences. That provision should not be there. There are provisions relating to category A and B fines built into the penalties provisions of the Bill. If the Minister of State feels greater powers are needed, the fines courts may impose should be increased. The recouping of expenses by the prosecutor, which would be the HSE in this case, is more common in regulatory or civil offences than in criminal offences. This is a criminal offence. It should be recognised as such and prosecuted as such, with appropriate penalties, fines and custodial sentences, where appropriate. The recouping of expenses is cumbersome and blunt and does not reflect the ability of the offender to pay.

Section 18 proposes to change section 10 of the Petty Sessions (Ireland) Act 1851 with regard to the statute of limitations on the prosecution of offences. This is now six months but the Bill would extend that to 12. Will the Minister of State give us a justification for that provision? Surely six months is plenty of time for the HSE or any other prosecutorial authority to get its act together and bring a prosecution. It is a summary matter. Let us not make it more punitive than it needs to be or allow the authorities not to have to get their act together.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill this afternoon. It is really important. There is not a shop you can go to in the country where you will not see bins outside the door littered with these awful looking disposable vapes. There is also some kind of trend to stick the stickers peeled off the top of these disposable vapes all over the bin. They just seem to be everywhere. I will get to the health hazards in a moment but, from an environmental point of view, these horrible little glowing neon plastic modules are flung around everywhere. It is worrying that, in recent years, we have seen the rate of vaping among young people increase at the same time that the rate of smoking nicotine products seems to be decreasing. I was on the previous Committee on Health, which looked at this matter, and I believe the increase is down to the way these products are packaged and sold. They are seen

as quite trendy. Young people are encouraged to take up these products. I would be very supportive of anything that curtails their use.

The public health Act of 2023 brought in licensing fees for the sale of tobacco and nicotine products. Before that legislation was passed, there was a registration fee of €50 per annum per retail premises regardless of how big or small the premises was. Now, there is a charge of €1,000 for the sale of tobacco products and €800 for the sale of nicotine products. The combined cost for a retailer is therefore €1,800 per annum. I have no issue with the cost. However, I have spoken to the Minister of State in the past and she will know I have an issue with the small retailer, a small shop in a village, paying the very same rate as Lidl, Aldi, Dunnes Stores, Tesco and so on. That is fundamentally wrong. There should be a far higher licensing fee for those huge retailers and a more minor charge for others. They are not at fault here. We need to home in on the companies that manufacture these vapes, sell them and market them to young people. I hope that can be looked at. The Minister of State and I have had several chats on the matter. I hope that, as this Bill and other legislation teed up in the Minister of State's Department progress, some amendment to the 2023 public health Act can be brought forward so that this punitive charge is not imposed on the small retailer and that a greater portion is paid by larger retailers.

I welcome to the Public Gallery students from Rice College in Ennis. These are the last few days of their school term before they wrap up for Christmas. They have come up to Leinster House and the Dáil today. They are having a nice day out. I welcome all the boys and girls from third year in Rice College who are here today. They may have come in at the end of the debate. For the next while, we will be debating disposable vapes and how the Government can legislate to ensure fewer young people take up vaping. It is very harmful for your health. The Government feels that these disposable vapes - we all know the brand names - are plastic and are usually chucked away after being used. They are very hazardous to the environment as well as being hazardous to your health. I wish the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, all the staff and all Members of the House a very happy Christmas.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I join with Deputy Crowe in his welcome to our guests in the Public Gallery. I hope they enjoy their day here in Leinster House and the debate we are now having.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have all seen the huge upsurge in the use of vapes. We have seen them normalised.

An awful lot of us would have probably been happy in the initial period. At this stage, we know an awful lot of people who have used vaping as a means of getting off cigarettes and that is the piece that needs to be protected. However, anybody who has walked around any town or city will have seen the place absolutely littered with single-use vapes and, as has been said previously, you do not have to put your head into the bins to see them. They are multicoloured. The attempt to sell them to a younger audience is absolutely huge and it is no shock that big tobacco is behind a huge amount of this. It needs to get a number of new clients hooked because that is the history of what it is has done. We need to protect against this. The idea of banning single-use vapes and finding a framework to do this is something we support, but it would be fair to say the way this issue of regulating vapes has been tackled by the Government has been

slipshod. We have had numerous pieces of legislation and dealt with all these issues on a piecemeal basis. We should just get our act together on this.

We know the issues that exist around advertising as regard flavourings. I am not talking about an outright ban, with the only thing allowed being a tobacco flavouring, but we need to look at this. I do not think the Government deciding to jack up the taxation on vapes was particularly helpful. It has created an issue for those people I spoke about earlier who are using vapes as a means of staying off cigarettes. We can all see the benefits there from a health point of view. While it is far from perfect to be vaping, it is a lot better than to be engaging in smoking, as regards carbon monoxide and all the other poisons that are delivered by cigarettes.

If we were being serious about this, we would tackle the whole sphere. We would start with the issue that exists around this normalisation and the fact a huge number of kids and others have been impacted by HHC. We know the huge impact that has had on some and, unfortunately, as a gateway to other drugs beyond. We know the health implications in general in relation to regular vapes. I do not think there is any parent who has not done an inspection around their own house to make sure there is not a plentiful supply there, and I cannot say that has always been successful either. That is the world we are living in. We have to make it somewhat better from the point of view of these being not as readily available, particularly to children, to whom they should not be sold in any way, shape or form. We need to make sure we have sufficient leverage to deal with that. We need to make sure single-use vapes, which are an absolute disaster even from an environmental point of view, are dealt with, and we need to make sure we do everything from the point of view of looking after those who use vaping as a means of staying off cigarettes. We know a greater level of support is required for that but we need to make sure we do not allow big tobacco to sell to another cohort of people and get them addicted. It is particularly unacceptable that children would suffer as a result of this. Therefore, we have to put the supports in.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The Social Democrats welcome this long-overdue legislation to ban single-use vapes. However, I do have some outstanding concerns about the Government's plans. The first relates to the Minister's piecemeal approach to regulating vapes. We are still waiting for legislation on packaging, advertising, flavours and other products such as nicotine pouches. Second, I have real concerns about the strength of the legislation. From my reading of the Bill, it may be outdated before it even gets onto the Statute Book.

In October, the WHO published a report on global tobacco-use trends. Since 2000, the WHO found that the number of people using tobacco has dropped by 120 million, which is a 27% drop. However, vapes were found to be fuelling a new wave of nicotine addiction, particularly in Europe. Adult vape use in Europe was found to be 4.6%, more than double the global average. Most alarmingly, the WHO found that Ireland has an adult vaping rate of 11.2%, putting us fourth highest out of 85 countries. In response, the WHO general secretary said:

... the tobacco industry is fighting back with new nicotine products, aggressively targeting young people. Governments must act faster and stronger in implementing proven tobacco control policies.

Among children and young people, vaping rates are even higher. The 2024 Healthy Ireland survey found that 17% of 15- to 24-year-olds reported using vapes either daily or occasionally.

This compared with just 11% two years previously, in 2022. While a European school survey project for 15- and 16-year-olds in Ireland found that 32% had tried vapes, 16% were current users and 7% reported daily use. The most common age at which people started using a vape was 14.

These figures, while shocking, should not come as a surprise. Successive Ministers have allowed vaping rates to surge with their indecision. In failing to act decisively, the crisis has been allowed to escalate. It is not like vaping companies have been subtle about their tactics. They have continually blatantly advertised their products towards children. Flavours like cotton candy, cherry cola and bubblegum are readily available in every corner shop. They are displayed like pick-and-mix rather than highly addictive products.

Recently, I was at a good briefing organised by HSE south west for Oireachtas Members. One of the focuses was on vaping. They gave us results of a study of 700 young people from Cork city who had completed the study by the Cork children and young people's services committee on vaping. One in four of those young people in Cork said the biggest challenge facing young people was vaping. One in three said the worst thing about Cork was vaping - maybe a sign of how great Cork is - while one in ten would ban or reduce the availability vapes around Cork city. Therefore, even young people want action and want these vapes banned and restricted. The HSE briefing was also really alarming in terms of the effects around how addictive vapes are. They showed an increased risk of asthma, an increased risk of depression, risks around oral health, lower sperm count, headaches and dizziness. They were really concerning reports from the HSE about the impact on young people and also the views of young people themselves in my city of Cork about how they want this regulated.

A ban on single-use vapes is long overdue. Why the delay on the Bill on packaging, advertising and flavours as well? That is a crucial part of it. We know this is how they are marketing and how they are targeting these young people. Young people are saying they want action here. It has now been 15 months since the previous Minister for Health secured Government approval for that Bill. Since the current Minister for Health took office, it has been listed as a legislative priority but there is still now sign of it. Fifteen months on, it is still listed. We are still waiting. How much more time does the Minister need to get this done? Unlike the Bill before us, my understanding is that that second Bill will need to go through an EU notification process under the technical standards directive, further delaying that implementation. However, if it can be done more quickly, as Deputy Ward has suggested, by amending this Bill on Committee Stage, we will absolutely support that. This needs to happen and the delay has been far too long. These reforms need to happen together. It is a mistake to wait and delay because the crucial issue is how they are targeting young people with the flavours, colours and marketing.

The Minister is very concerned about productivity in the health services and she constantly refers at the health committee to productivity across the health service. Looking at her own legislative output this year, however, she should reflect on her own productivity, particularly when it comes to legislation. We are waiting too long for these Bills to come through, particularly the other Bill approved 15 months ago, on which we are still waiting.

We must also not lose sight of the fact that a considerable share of the vape market in Ireland and internationally is controlled by the tobacco industry. It recognised the trends and adapted quickly, recruiting a new generation of addicted customers to feed its profits. The companies

behind Marlboro and P.J. Carroll both have vape lines, while Elf Bar and Lost Mary, the disposable vape brands that have captured the Irish market, are manufactured by ambiguous companies in China. According to the Irish Heart Foundation, reports show that the vape market in China is now overseen by that state's national tobacco corporation and the state's tobacco monopoly administration.

It does not stop at vapes, however. The tobacco industry is also behind the emerging market for nicotine pouches, which are being cynically marketed at young people.

Last August, the Irish Cancer Society highlighted that big tobacco was now front and centre at a string of festivals and concerts in Ireland heavily promoting its nicotine products and pouches. The main brands, Velo and Nordic Spirit, are owned by British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International, respectively. I am alarmed by the level of lobbying that has been going on, particularly by some of the vape retailers. Not long ago, one of those retailers - perhaps the leading one - was offering its customers €20 in phone credit for making submissions to the Government's consultation on vaping. It is really concerning that a company with vested interests would do that.

I fully accept that vapes have a place in the market as a smoking cessation tool. I support Deputy Sherlock's call that more be done in terms of provision of vaping cessation programmes. The move towards stricter regulation of the vaping market is not about penalising those who use vaping to stop smoking. It is about ensuring a whole new generation of people do not become addicted to nicotine. We simply can no longer bury our heads in the sand. A balance must be struck. A total of 31 million vapes were sold in Ireland last year. That should be setting off alarm bells. Aside from the obvious health implications, there are also environmental impacts from single-use vapes. Looking around any city, town or village, one will see vape packaging and stickers all around. Many vape users are not disposing of their devices properly. The only effective way to address this is to ban disposable vapes.

While I fully support the Bill's principles, I have concerns about the adequacy of its provisions. The vape manufacturers seem already to be ahead of the legislation. In most shops right now, if I were to ask for a Lost Mary disposable vape, I would be handed one that has a charging port and a removable pre-filled pod, as in the picture I have in my hand. This model is sold as a disposable vape and generally costs no more than €10. Even if it could be reused, there is little incentive to do so. The recent addition of these charging ports and removable pods was done purely as a pre-emptive measure to exploit a loophole. We must close that loophole in this Bill. Nobody is reusing these products; they are being treated as disposable. Even if somebody tried to buy a refill pod for them, it probably is not possible. I have not seen refill pods on sale alongside these vapes in any store. The charging port and removable pod are little more than props designed to circumvent the forthcoming ban. This needs to be addressed on Committee Stage.

The other issue of concern is the language used in the Bill's definition of single-use vapes. Section 2(1) defines them as follows:

"single-use vape" means a vape that is not designed or intended to be re-used and includes any vape that is—

(a) not refillable, or

(b) not rechargeable

My concern is with the use of the word "or" instead of "and". Both the Department and the Oireachtas Library and Research Service use "and" in their briefing documents. The Bill digest states that "a vape will only be considered reusable, and therefore legal to sell, if it is both rechargeable and refillable (not just one or the other)". The use of "or" in the Bill is somewhat confusing and clarity is needed in this regard. A vape should only be considered reusable if it is genuinely both rechargeable and refillable. The wording in the Bill means a vape could be considered reusable if it has one of those features. This would be a major issues because there are large disposable vapes on the market that last for the equivalent of ten standard disposable vapes. While these large vapes can be recharged for a period and might last ten times longer than a standard disposable vape, they are not refillable.

For the legislation to be effective, enforcement is important. As we know, the existing laws are already being breached by some retailers. In 2024, the HSE carried out 249 vape-related inspections. Those checks found that 55 of the inspected retailers were selling vapes that breached the EU regulations. Last month, the HSE confirmed to the *Irish Independent* that 40 retailers in 2024 were found to be breaking the law by selling vapes to children. Following the passage of the legislation, the HSE's national environmental health service role will increase. Will the service's enforcement capacity and budget for authorised officers be expanded to ensure the ban can be enforced on a national basis? It is really important that it has the resources to enforce the ban. If we pass this law, we must resource the HSE to do effective enforcement. Is work under way to recruit to the additional posts that will be needed? I note that the Bill's regulatory impact assessment estimates funding of €3.1 million per year will be required.

My understanding is that the EU notification process can take up to six months. Has that process begun or can it not commence until the legislation is passed? I am conscious that the upcoming public health (tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products) (amendment) Bill will also require notification at EU level. Will the Minister of State outline the expected timelines for the introduction of both Bills in practice? Will the supplementary legislation and this Bill be commenced in tandem or separately?

The Social Democrats will support the Bill to progress to Committee Stage. However, there are gaps in it that need to be addressed. I sincerely hope the Minister of State will work constructively with us to strengthen the Bill. We have a shared aim in this matter. At the Working Group of Committee Cathaoirligh last week, the Taoiseach said the Government would engage with the Opposition on amendments and that he is always open to accepting amendments. That has not been my experience to date of the Department of Health, with none of the amendments put forward so far from the Opposition benches being accepted. I hope the Minister of State will take the message from the Taoiseach that amendments from the Opposition benches will be accepted. I will be proposing constructive amendments to improve the legislation, close the loopholes and ensure we have an effective ban in place. I really hope the Minister of State will work with me in good faith to ensure we have the best legislation possible. We all want to get this right, first and foremost to protect children. We are up against a tobacco industry that is not going down without a fight. It will exploit every single loophole. That is why we need to ensure the legislation is watertight. We need a Bill that will stand the test of time, not one that will be obsolete on arrival.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I welcome the Bill but it is too slow in what it proposes to implement. The tobacco industry is very quick at coming up with new and innovative ways of delivering nicotine to individuals, getting them addicted to its products and keeping its bottom line very healthy while everyone else suffers from those products. Rather than waiting years to deal with these issues, we need to be much more proactive.

While my colleague has spoken specifically about vapes, I will focus on nicotine pouches, which should be incorporated in the provisions of the Bill. As the Minister of State knows, these small pouches are placed between the gum and inner lip. They are very discreet, which is why a lot of students like them. They can use them during school time and can very easily hide them from their parents. They are being marketed really aggressively at students. They can be bought in any corner shop. They come in cool little packages with very funky designs and, similar to vapes, they are flavoured to appeal to schoolchildren. These products are incredibly strong, with a single pouch having up to 30 mg of nicotine. This compares with a single cigarette delivering 1 mg to 2 mg of nicotine into the smoker's system. One pouch could be as strong as an entire pack of cigarettes. There are students buying them and using them throughout the school day.

It is nearly two years exactly since I first raised this issue with the then Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly. He said at the time that pouches were not really an issue here and the matter was being looked at by the EU. Two years down the road, nothing has been done. There are no controls over the usage or sale of nicotine pouches. I am really concerned about the impact on young people in particular. The Minister of State mentioned during the summer that she was very keen to deal with these products. I really welcome that but I ask that it be done at speed. They have been available to students for two years now. We have a whole cohort of students who have become addicted to them over that two-year period.

We cannot afford to allow that to continue any longer. I recently had a 17-year-old tell me that they had not taken a nicotine pouch for eight days and they were so pleased with themselves. That is what we are talking about. This is something I have seen in schools in Wicklow, but I know it is an issue across the country. The principals association has repeatedly raised this as an issue. Principals have asked for guidance from the HSE to be sent to schools because they are sort of in a limbo land with this. I do not believe that guidance has been sent, but that is something very simple that should happen immediately to assist school communities deal with this scourge.

I also have major concerns about promotions by different companies. It is possible to get vapes for free by logging in online with these companies. They will send out a free sample. They can also be accessed free at concerts. These companies promote concerts. There is a lot of money going into promoting vapes because they know there is a huge market of young people that are willing to utilise their products, but those young people will pay a very high price for this. That is something we need to address urgently. I ask that the Minister deals with the issue in this Bill. It is not just a question of dealing with the age limit, because my understanding is that when she spoke about the Bill, it was primarily to ensure that tobacco pouches cannot be sold to under-18s, but similar to vapes, it is not just the question of age, it is the flavourings, accessibility and the designs on them. They are very attractive products to a young person. I ask that the Minister would examine all those issues. Pouches are very similar to vapes. As we are dealing with the vapes, I urge her to please deal with these other products.

Not only that, but will she please future-proof the legislation because, as we can see, the innovations from the tobacco industry are just being pumped out so we need to get ahead of all these things? Perhaps it could be done through a regulatory framework rather than it having to be done through legislation all the time. Any nicotine products should be able to be dealt with quickly by the Minister for Health if she deems it appropriate and if that is what the health recommendations are. I thank the Minister of State for considering that. I will follow it up. I would really like to see movement. In particular, it would be a good move if the Minister could get the guidelines out to schools.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the Chamber to present this important legislation. I welcome this valuable Bill although, as I will speak to in a moment, the scope of it is far too narrow. I would like to put a few questions to the Minister of State on that and she might be able to address them in her wrap-up.

As a starting point, we cannot be in any doubt that when we consider the prevalence of vaping and the growth in its use, particularly among young people, greater regulation is needed from a public health perspective. To put it very simply, products containing nicotine are addictive and harmful. When we see such a huge uptake in vaping, it must be treated as a public health issue. It should not be viewed, as some might advocate, as somehow better because vapes do not contain the degree of potency of ordinary cigarettes. I am sure the Minister of State has often heard the Taoiseach describe vapes as the revenge of the tobacco industry. I fully agree with him on that particular point.

It looks like around 50 million vapes will be sold in Ireland this year with a value of about €400 million. The industry has grown from nothing in a very sudden and dramatic fashion. Almost all the disposable vapes that are consumed in Ireland come from China. Their sale is banned among teenagers in China, but they are exported here where they are freely consumed. Vape companies are making huge profits from making nicotine addicts. The products are clearly marketed at children. They have flavours like bubblegum, cotton candy and marshmallow. These are clearly designed to be attractive to children and young people, to get them consuming them and to put them at risk of addiction to these unhealthy but also costly products.

Almost every European country, including Ireland, has a form of basic regulation with respect to vapes and e-cigarettes, but the trend recently has been not only to tighten the level of restrictions and to tighten sales, but also to tighten the flavourings used in vapes. That is the case in Belgium, France and in Germany. The UK has gone even further and has introduced a ban on disposable vapes in their entirety.

While the public health element is foremost in our minds in this Bill and in the role of the Minister of State, public health is not the only issue in that there is an environmental impact as well, in particular when it comes to disposable vapes. When my former Green Party colleague Ossian Smyth was a Minister of State, he led the charge on that environmental point in the previous Government. He worked very closely with the former Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, to develop legislation that was comprehensive on the issue of vaping. That Bill sought to ban disposable vapes, limit vape flavours to tobacco, as other countries are now doing, and ban point-of-sale display and advertising of vape products in shops other than in vape shops. That was comprehensive legislation and Cabinet approval was sought and

achieved for it in September 2024. Over a year later I am curious as to why it has taken so long for this legislation to appear, given there had been approval for the heads of the Bill and for it to come to the House for a Second Stage debate. Why has the Bill shrunk so dramatically in that time period? That is not really clear from what has been presented to us today. What is the reason for that delay and why are two Bills necessary to deal with the issues given that when the Cabinet gave approval to the measures in September last year they were very easily comprehended within a single Bill? The work was done back then. The heads of the Bill were ready to go. While I welcome this Bill, and will support it, how is it that the really valuable work on environmental health and public health measures that had already received Cabinet approval have been left on the long finger?

One or two others Deputies asked this question, which I ask the Minister of State to address in her conclusions. I refer to engagement with the EU on technical regulation information systems notifications. When a member state is looking to put a significant restriction on a product freely in circulation across member states, there has to be a notification process. Have the Government started the notification process or is it waiting for this Bill to pass before it does so? If the Minister is taking that approach, I urge her to reconsider and to start the recognition and regulation process now, because the earlier we start the better. If we do the two processes - the consideration of the Bill in this House and in the other House, and the engagement with the European authorities - at the same time, that will allow us to enjoy the important health and environmental benefits from this legislation at an earlier time.

On a broader point, in 2023 legislation was passed to prevent the sale of vapes to children and to only permit the sale of vapes through licensed retailers in the same way tobacco retailers are licensed. We all know that Bill is not being fully followed. It is clear that vapes are still being sold in unlicensed premises such as mobile phone shops, and they are being sold to children. I am curious as to why a retail licensing system under the 2023 legislation has not been set up yet. Why is it still possible that vapes are being sold to children? If legislation that has been on the books for more than two years is not being fully enforced, I wonder how the Minister of State can be confident that the valuable new rules that she is looking to bring through in this legislation will be enforced, which is a worry.

A number of Deputies have raised tobacco pouches and how they have become incredibly prevalent in terms of consumption, and how they are being advertised very widely in a wide range of social situations. The tobacco industry seems to have moved another step forward. It has almost gotten past vapes before the legislation has caught up. I urge the Minister of State and the Government to look at this point. We all recognise that we did not legislate in time for vapes.

Vapes were allowed to take hold. They were allowed be making the sales of 50 million units every year in Ireland. They were earning €400 million in income for their producers without a proper regulatory framework being put in place. We are only catching up on part of that right now in the Bill.

Let us not make that same mistake again. We have the opportunity. Tobacco pouches are about to become a major public health issue. Let us not wait like we did with vapes. Let us act quickly and bring forward legislation based on science. That requires the Department undertaking some serious research. The precautionary principle needs to apply here. We know for 40, 50 or 60 years that the tobacco industry lied about the impact of cigarettes. That is a

proven statement. We know that it took us too long to understand the impact of vapes, particularly on young people. Let us not allow that delay to take place when it comes to tobacco pouches. Let us take a precautionary approach. Let us limit their sales at least away from those under 18. Adults, of course, can make choices of their own. When it comes to protecting children, we need to act now, not delay, adopt a precautionary principle approach and ensure that we can protect young people from any potential health risks and harms that come from tobacco pouches. When we even think of what they are composed of, we have to strongly suspect that there are going to be long-term health risks from them.

I thank the Minister of State for the opportunity to speak on this. I look forward to supporting this Bill, but it is important that she answers those questions about why the other important elements that Cabinet had previously given approval to - elements that would have improved environmental health and public health - have been left out. If they are not being included in this Bill, when will the Minister of State bring them forward?

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this. I have huge concerns about vaping and have had for quite some time, particularly about the issue of vaping companies targeting young people as part of their marketing strategy. This is very compelling marketing strategy and it has been a successful strategy. Vape companies are using beautiful scents and smells and so on and presenting vapes as fun, almost like a toy. If children went into a vape shop, I am sure they would think that they were some beautiful sweets or toys. They are presented like bubblegum, candy, fruit or cocktails. The colours are always so bright, colourful and so appealing to young people. It is not accidental; it is a deliberate strategy. It is therefore not surprising that the numbers of people who are vaping today have never actually smoked a cigarette. A total of 76% of young vapers have never smoked a cigarette. It is not a step-down option for people in many instances. Indeed, it is a gateway into smoking and harder drugs. In 2019, of those among 15-year-olds and 16-year-olds, just 9% of that cohort used vapes. Last year, that was 23%. It is a significant rise. It is time that this House brought in legislation to target this. The market is worth over €200 million a year.

I urge the Minister of State to ensure that we have legislation, that we bring in legislation that would limit vape flavours and that we would introduce a ban on point of sale advertising, similar to what was done with alcohol, in order that we try to protect young people in this regard. I also raised in this House a number of months ago the issue of HHC, a semi-synthetic cannabinoid, being sold in vape shops in vapes. I am glad the Government moved and prohibited this. It just shows the devastating impact that is happening to our young people. I know many young people across Mayo who bought HHC in a vape shop and suffered significantly as a result of this. We are behind the curve on this. We are behind other countries. It is time that we move to protect our young people. I would like to see a ban on the beautiful colours, the bubblegum and the smells. That marketing strategy must be counteracted. I am sure there are many people who smoke and are using vapes as a step down away from that. That is potentially a good thing and it can be positive. We must protect our young people and bring in legislation to prevent the sale and passing it out like sweets.

More research also needs to go into the chemicals and the substances in vapes. It is a new technology. There is not enough research on the long-term health implications. I ask the Minister of State to look into this and work with the HSE to ensure that we have the full information in relation to the chemicals in vape products.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I welcome the introduction of this Bill. I concur with colleagues. The willingness to accept amendments on Committee Stage will be most important. If that can be enabled, it would be a move in a strong and positive direction. This is something that parents, children, teenagers, teachers, Tidy Towns volunteers and public health professionals are strongly in favour of. I commend the Minister of State on the work that has been done to date. The devil will be in the detail. Nicotine, no matter what way it is dressed up, whether it is in a pouch, in a single-use or a continuous-product, is addictive. It is a gateway drug.

The most concerning aspect of the contents of these products is the additional items, namely, propylene glycol, formaldehyde, benzene, heavy metals such as lead, nickel and cadmium, and the ultrafine particles. This is where the devil is in the detail and where the respiratory and the carcinogenic effects are most prevalent and dangerous. I disagree completely with the points that have been made in relation to substitution and vaping being a substitute for smoking. We have nicotine replacement therapy minus these other chemicals. That is where the emphasis needs to be placed. In terms of supporting people stepping down and stepping away from these products, there will have to be a concurrent support for people to step over and to step up to the use of nicotine replacement therapy through the community pharmacy network.

I will speak particularly about Meath Comhairle na nÓg, the young people's version of Meath County Council. It carried out a poster campaign and has had various surveys and a video campaign on the harm of drugs. It also included vaping in that. Young people are crying out for support. I flag the necessity for inspection of the youth support services in conjunction with nicotine replacement services that are going to be required to make sure that they are available at the same time or shortly after the banning of the product because young people are addicted to nicotine and withdrawal effects will have to be dealt with. There is a broader issue in the regard around mental health, advertising and the safeguards, which will all be best saved for in-depth discussion on Committee Stage.

Given the season and the prevalence of respiratory illnesses be they RSV or influenza-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could the Deputy move the adjournment of the debate?

Deputy Gillian Toole: I so move.

Debate adjourned.

Sitting suspended at 3.51 p.m. until 3.55 p.m.

Fisheries: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I appreciate the opportunity to address the House on what is an important matter. I thank the Deputies for seeking the opportunity for statements on fishing opportunities in 2026. I welcome the timely opportunity to discuss the concerns affecting the fisheries and seafood sector. I welcome the contributions of so many at the Oireachtas Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs and look forward to continued engagement today. I wish to reassure the Dáil that as Minister of State with responsibility for fisheries and the marine, I

recognise the importance of maintaining a vibrant fishing sector both for the communities that rely on it and the wider economy. Importantly, I also recognise that these same coastal communities are feeling dismay and despair at the outcome of the AGRIFISH Council negotiations in Brussels last week.

The despair is twofold. The first concerns the actualisation of the total allowable catch, TAC, being set at the headline ICES advice by the EU, particularly the resultant quotas for pelagic stocks, while the second concerns the fact that Ireland's invocation of the Hague preferences, which are a key element of our relative stability, was blocked by a group of larger member states led by France and Germany, involving the Netherlands and aided by Poland. The conclusions reached in Brussels are a culmination of bilateral and trilateral negotiations by the EU with third countries. This was followed by the internal EU matters of the Baltic, western Mediterranean and the EU main TAC and quota regulation, which covers stocks in the Atlantic, the North Sea and adjacent waters and includes the fish stocks of relevance to Ireland.

Most of the stocks covered by this regulation are shared with third countries - predominantly the UK and Norway. There are only two stocks for which Ireland has quota that are autonomous Union stocks. These are sole and plaice in a location referred to as 7bc, which is off Ireland's west coast. The TAC for these stocks have been set at 15 tonnes annually for 2024, 2025 and 2026 in line with ICES advice and, therefore, were not under consideration in this proposal, which came to a conclusion early last Saturday morning.

It is clear that the outcomes of this year's December AGRIFISH Council will result in severely reduced fishing opportunities for 2026. The scientific advice upon which the council's decisions were based reflects the impact of overfishing of the mackerel stock by certain third countries. The advised 70% reduction in the total allowable catch for mackerel is compounded by a 41% reduction in blue whiting, a 22% reduction in boarfish and further reductions in nephrops or Dublin Bay prawns as they are known. We were aware of these concerns for some time as were many in this House because we had a discussion here and at the Joint Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs about this impending scientific advice but it was effectively crystallised at the weekend and, therefore, has created significant shock in the communities that are most affected by and depend so much fishing in the first instance, the processing sector and all the supply chains that are very much part of the industry.

Ireland's fishing opportunities for 2026 amount to approximately over 120,000 tonnes with an estimated first-sale value of €205 million. This represents a decrease of one third - €100 million to €105 million - on the estimated value of the 2025 quota. These figures reflect quota outcomes for Ireland across the main pelagic, demersal and nephrops stocks for 2026. As a result, while the overall scale of opportunity remains substantial, the distribution of quota across key stocks presents ongoing challenges for fleet planning, processing throughput and coastal communities that are highly dependent on specific fisheries.

It is important that we do not focus our ire on the scientific advice here. The advice is merely reflecting years of overfishing by other countries and we, the EU and specifically Ireland are suffering the consequences. The question arises as to what we are going to do about it. Ireland has consistently called for action against those countries that over fish mackerel. Given that Ireland holds the largest share of EU quota for mackerel in the western waters area, the devastating impact of the decline in this stock will be acutely felt by both the catching and processing sectors.

4 o'clock

On behalf of the Government, I have called for the EU to send a clear message that actions that threaten the sustainability of our shared stocks are not acceptable. At the recent AGRIFISH Council, the importance of a concerted EU response was discussed by ministers, including the option of triggering the unsustainable fishing regulation. This is something I have sought for some time and will continue to pursue. Even since the Council last week, we have seen questionable actions taken by other third countries in how we manage the mackerel stock in the north-east Atlantic. As recently as Monday evening, Norway, the UK, the Faroes and Iceland agreed, without the EU, on management arrangements for mackerel for 2026.

The ICES headline advice for 2026 is 174,357 tonnes, which would represent a 70% reduction in last year's activity. This is based on a 50% probability that the stock will recover to its biomass limit, Blim, in 2027. I will define Blim for the benefit of the record of the House. Spawning stock biomass is the weight of the sexually mature fish in a population. Blim means the level of spawning stock biomass below which recruitment, that is, reproduction, is impaired, or the stock dynamics are unknown. Despite this, however, the four parties - Norway, the UK, the Faroes and Iceland - have agreed that the 2026 TAC should be 299,000 tonnes. This is based on the alternative catch scenario given by ICES based on application of the maximum sustainable yield rule, ignoring that the stock is below Blim. The really important thing about Blim is that it is a term set that gives the best chance of the stock recovering. That is something we all want to see. We want to see conservation measures that ensure we have long-term viability for our coastal communities and fishing stocks. When you deviate from that, you risk the potential for ultimate elimination of a stock. We now have a challenge in how we address this based on what were our partners up to now have done. The higher catch is associated with a higher risk, as I said, that the stock will not recover to its Blim in 2027. It may ultimately deplete the stock, take much longer to try to save it and, therefore, impact for a much greater period.

The four-party agreement indicates that their combined share is 79.45%, which is equivalent to 238,000 tonnes, and 37% above the headline advice of 174,000 tonnes. The EU will now have to make a decision on whether it remains faithful to the ICES headline advice of 174,000 tonnes or takes its share of the higher figure of 299,000 tonnes. There are many issues to be carefully considered here. A higher TAC means more fish for our fleet but the one issue we need to be mindful of is that overfishing by some third countries has led to the collapse of the stock and a careful balance needs to be struck. This is Ireland's most important stock and we need to sustain it in the long run. The impact of the scientific advice and resulting reductions in available quota, combined with Ireland not receiving its Hague preference quotas, will have significant operational and economic feasibility impacts on the seafood sector. The 2026 quota outcomes reflect the continued balancing act between maintaining viable fishing opportunities and protecting fish stocks in line with scientific advice under the Common Fisheries Policy. For Ireland, this reinforces the importance of maximising value from available quota and maintaining high standards of quality and market positioning.

I will address the non-application of Ireland's Hague preferences in the TAC and quota regulation. The Hague preferences were created to account for Ireland's underdeveloped fleet and to counter the impact of access to Irish waters provided to vessels of other EU nations. These amounts of fish allocated to Ireland from other member states protected our fishing fleet

from periods of severely depleted stocks. Deputies will be aware that, regrettably, a group of member states chose to block the invocation of Ireland's Hague preferences this year; I have outlined the countries concerned. I am extremely disappointed that these member states have chosen to block the protection of our fleet at our time of most need. I said at the Council I felt it was comparable to an act of betrayal by colleagues of the fundamental terms and conditions of an insurance policy that is being paid for in fish by Ireland since 1983. It is particularly upsetting that the charge has been led by those who benefited most from access to Irish waters every year since 1983.

I know, from discussions of the Council outcomes with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs yesterday, that Members will share the concerns I have outlined today, that they are equally appalled at the actions of those other member states and that they wish to know what actions will be taken. I acknowledge the support I have had from Irish seafood industry representatives over the past number of weeks. They have spoken as one and supported the approach I have taken in discussions and negotiations.

An intensive schedule of work has to be undertaken over the coming weeks. I intend to work with colleagues in addressing that. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, and I have made it very clear that we intend to establish a task force, under the auspices of the food vision strategy, to advance a framework of supports for the seafood sector. A key priority for the food vision-seafood group will be to ensure that a framework of economic, environmental and social sustainability supports is available to the fisheries and seafood processing sector and its coastal communities. Obviously, we want to prioritise that work and ensure we move quickly to get that up and running. The group will be chaired by an independent chair and will include representatives from the fishing organisations, aquaculture and the seafood processing organisations. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and its agencies, and other relevant Departments and agencies, will form a very significant part of that.

As I said, the task force will have to have an intensive schedule of work in the early stages to get it up and running. I want to see an interim report delivered in the first quarter of next year. I expect the first meeting of this group to start in early January and begin its work. As I mentioned at the committee yesterday, I intend to seek some external support to augment our Department capabilities to ensure the matter gets the priority it deserves. I am conscious that additional resources will be required to carry this out. I have already had conversations, on a number of occasions, with the Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Chambers. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, and I have had his support in this regard. We intend to move quickly on it. The Minister is here. He has been a tremendous support to me in my work over the last number of weeks. He has been available to use his influence, which is very considerable at European level, to try to get the best possible outcome. We are committed to working in unison through this particular period.

We intend to appoint Michael Berkery as the independent chair. Michael is a well-known figure in the Irish agri-sector. He has made very significant contributions to Irish agriculture and the agrifood sector, notably, as CEO of the Irish Farmers' Association for 25 years, where he excelled in policy shaping and improving farmers' prospects. He was uncompromising in his pursuit of farming interests and is renowned for his exceptional political judgment and negotiating skills. These skills were harnessed through major CAP reforms and World Trade Organization negotiations, cementing his role as a pivotal figure in Irish agriculture history.

Michael understands the needs of rural and coastal communities. He has been a tireless champion for rural communities. He brings enormous experience to dealing with politicians, senior civil servants, Departments, State agencies and the European Commission. He is alert to EU and national Exchequer funding, the relevant EU and national legislation and the constraints imposed by EU state aid rules by the European Commission.

I look forward, together with the Minister, to building in a number of other individuals as part of that committee. I will certainly be happy to take any thoughts or views Members have in formulating that response or task force to address the very significant crisis we know we are facing.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We obviously had the chance at the committee yesterday to go through what a disaster this outcome is and how it cannot stand.

The Common Fisheries Policy has been deeply unfair to Ireland's fishing and coastal communities throughout the years. What happened with Brexit has rightly been described as a betrayal of those communities. It was a power grab and I will deal with some of the companies at the heart of this soon. What happened at the Fisheries Council now has to be the final insult. There has to be a complete change in approach from our Government in dealing with our European partners when it comes to the Common Fisheries Policy. It is so serious.

I will start with the Hague preferences. The Hague preferences were put in place in 1976. Their origin is Annex VII of the EEC Council Resolution, 3 November 1976. They were in place for Ireland and Britain as a *quid pro quo* for access to our waters. Our waters have given huge wealth to fishing fleets across Europe. They are some of the richest fishing waters in the world. The Hague preferences are central to that. That was a veneer of fairness and it was deployed from time to time over the years where necessary. To suggest that the Hague preferences can just be done away with is absolutely unacceptable. The Minister of State must use every single legal instrument available to him to challenge this. The member states who united to block us invoking the Hague preferences know very well that this is not about taking fish away from them. This is about a balance for all the fish they have taken from our waters over the years. They know that very well. I believe that there has unfortunately been a meek response from Irish Governments. I do not include the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, in that, but before him there was a meek resistance to what was happening for too many years. They believe that can continue. The Minister of State needs to prove them wrong. He needs to prove that they cannot do this.

Let us talk about why it was that the Netherlands, France, Germany and Poland united to outrageously attack our fishing and coastal communities when they know what happened after Brexit. They know we took the biggest hit from Brexit. Burden sharing never happened. They know that and they would do that to us. It was said yesterday by my colleague, Deputy Conor D. McGuinness, and I agree with him, that the Minister of State needs to bring every ambassador from those four countries in to meet him urgently. He needs to make it clear what they did is seen as an attack on our people by a member state. I will tell him why I believe they did it.

I want to talk about the big five. The big five are referred to as an extremely powerful oligopoly. These are corporations that co-operate and work together, and that have a collective value of €2.4 billion. It is estimated that by buying up quota across the European Union they

have one in six of the fish caught under their control. They are huge. I will name them. They are Parlevliet and van der Plas, Cornelis Vrolijk, Van der Zwan, Alda Seafood and the De Boer family. The big one is Parlevliet and van der Plas. Let us talk about them. When I talk about the big five there has been much reportage of this. This is not a secret. It is widely known. I have an absolutely damning report from earlier this year into the actions of these corporations. At the centre of it is Parlevliet and van der Plas. I also have a report from a couple of years ago from Follow the Money, which did an exposé on the massive control this company has, which is led by Dirk Parlevliet. This company is valued at €1.5 billion. That is probably conservative because there is a lack of accountability about quota allocation across Europe. Nobody can tell us definitively who actually has it. It is estimated at €1.5 billion. This is the biggest fish company in Europe. It has huge influence. It is estimated that the big five control 230 vessels. They own the biggest super trawlers in the world. When you look up our west coast you see these super trawlers vacuuming up the fish in our waters. This has been going on for far too long. I am asking the Minister of State to take every legal action at his disposal to challenge what happened with the Hague preferences. It just cannot stand, but he must also call out the big five, particularly Parlevliet and van der Plas. There is no doubt that these five companies, but particularly P and P, as it is abbreviated, had more influence over the actions of Germany, France, Poland and their own country of the Netherlands, than Ireland did. The lack of respect for a fellow member state that suffered so egregiously after Brexit and has struggled so much with our declining allocation of fish quota, is outrageous. However, it gets worse than just what happens within the European Union.

These companies have huge interests in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. These companies have also benefited from the reckless over-fishing that has left the mackerel species on the precipice. They also benefit from the deal with Norway to get access to the cod because they have interests there. Everywhere you turn these corporations are winning through. This is corruption. This is a fundamental attack on our democracy and the European Union. Our Government cannot stand for it. Our Government must stand up and speak loudly about what is happening here. Have no doubt that what took place in the Fisheries Council was utter corruption. Corporations have united together using the weaknesses and fundamental flaws of the Common Fisheries Policy to buy out quota to recklessly over-fish through Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Then there are their interests in Britain. They have huge interests in Britain. What has happened in recent days? Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Norway and the UK have united and made an agreement about mackerel. They did not pay any heed to the science. This agreement is way below what has been agreed at the Fisheries Council. Again, I ask the Minister of State what he is going to do about that. Britain has signed up to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. It must be aligned to the Common Fisheries Policy. How can it make a deal and enable recklessness and then benefit from a deal with the European Union? There has to be consistency here.

To summarise, we have our fishing and coastal communities decimated. They were the rule takers. They played by the rules. They followed the science. We have a small number of massive corporations based in the Netherlands that have huge influence over member states. This is not environmentally friendly policy. This is not about that. This is not about what the Common Fisheries Policy states about social and economic impacts being considered by every member state before they allocate quota. It is stitched into the Common Fisheries Policy. What has happened here is an outrageous attack on our sovereignty and our people.

In the time I have I left I again draw the Minister of State's attention to the 2016 Supreme Court decision in *Barlow v Minister for Agriculture*. It is clear from that decision that the Supreme Court says that Article 10 means that we do have control over our waters as well as of other natural resources. I ask the Minister of State to get legal advice about what happened with the Hague preferences, Article 10 and the Supreme Court ruling and to take legal action to defend our interests. It will not be enough to set up a task force. Of course, financial resources are needed, but when these boats in a number of years' time need to go back to fish, there needs to be fish there. I ask the Minister of State to do everything he can.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Caithfidh mé labhairt ar dhá cheist, is iad sin, na cuótaí agus a dtionchar eacnamaíocha cois cósta; agus ceannas, údarás agus cumhacht na hÉireann thar ár bhfarraigí féin. Tá breis agus 90% dár gcríoch mar Stát suite ar an bhfarraige ach is fíorbheag an smacht atá againn ar na héisc a bhaintear aisti. Thar na blianta, faoi rialacha an Chomhbheartais Iascaigh, tá an ceart sin tógtha uainn de réir a chéile. Tá tíortha eile ag baint tairbhe as uiscí na hÉireann, agus ní tíortha de chuid an Aontais Eorpaigh iad uile. Is í an fhírinne lom ná go bhfághtar ár n-iascairí féin ar an imeall i gcónaí. Is léir ón méid atá tarlaithe anseo gur beag meáchan atá ag guth na hÉireann nuair a thagann brú idirnáisiúnta i gceist. Ní ceist theicniúil amháin í seo; is ceist pholaitiúil í. Is léir arís eile nach bhfuil ceannas ceart againn ar ár n-acmhainní nádúrtha féin. Is iad pobail bheaga cois cósta a íocann an praghas.

Tá tionchar ar leith ag na cinntí seo ar ár gceantair Ghaeltachta. I go leor de na ceantair sin, is iad na hiascairí cnámh droma an gheilleagair áitiúla. Beidh drochthionchar eacnamaíocha ag na cinntí seo agus níl roghanna fostaíochta eile ar fáil go héasca in an-chuid de na ceantair seo. Nuair a laghdaítear cuótaí, ní chailltear ioncam amháin; cailltear daoine óga agus teaghlaigh agus laghdaítear an Ghaeilge mar theanga phobail. Is ceist teanga agus chultúir í seo chomh maith le ceist eacnamaíocha. Tá staitisticí soiléire ann a thugann léargas air seo. Tá cuid mhór de na ceantair Ghaeltachta i measc na gceantar is leochailí ó thaobh dífhostaíochta agus imirce de. Nuair a imíonn an obair ón bhfarraige, leanann an imirce í. Is bagairt dhíreach d'inhuanaitheacht na Gaeltachta í seo. Ní féidir leis an Rialtas a rá go bhfuil sé ag tacú leis an nGaelainn agus é ag glacadh le beartas a scríosann bunús eacnamaíochta na gceantar sin ag an am céanna.

Tá sé ráite go soiléir ag na heagraíochtaí iascaigh go bhfuil teip ar struchtúr an Chomhbheartais Iascaigh. Tá sé sin ráite againn sa choiste agus ag mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Mac Lochlainn, chomh maith. Aontaím leis an méid atá ráite ag na heagrais iascaigh ach téim céim níos faide; is ceist cheannais í seo. Muna bhfuil an chumhacht againn ar n-acmhainní a chosaint, beimid i gcónaí ag plé leis na hiarmhairtí céanna, is iad sin, laghdaithe, géarchéimeanna agus pobail á bhfágáil ar lár. Caithfidh seasamh polaitiúil a ghlacadh ar son na tíre. Beidh muidne ar an taobh seo ag tacú leis an Aire Stáit má dhéanann sé amhlaidh. Caithfear a rá go soiléir nach féidir leis an bpobal cósta leanúint ar aghaidh ag íoc as easpa smachta agus cothromais ar leibhéal na hEorpa. Tá athrú treo iomlán ag teastáil anois, agus tá sé i bhfad thar am.

The outcome of the recent Common Fisheries Policy negotiations represents one of the most severe shocks, if not the most severe shock, the Irish fishing industry has faced in its existence. It was not a sudden collapse, it was the final shove in a long process of decline that Government parties managed, excused and normalised. What was already fragile has now been pushed

dangerously close to a point of no return. That is the responsibility of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and successive administrations.

We acknowledge the scientific advice is stark, with proposed reductions around 70% for mackerel, deep cuts to blue whiting and significant reductions across other North Atlantic species and prawns in the Irish Sea. Sinn Féin accepts science must guide fisheries management, there is no dispute over that, but stock sustainability matters. Justice and fairness also matter and science does not answer the political questions at the heart of this particular crisis. Who is breaking the rules, who is overfishing shared stocks and why is it always Irish fishermen and Ireland's coastal communities who are expected to pay the price?

The Minister of State said at the committee meeting yesterday, and I agreed with him, that our waters cannot sustain the level of fishing and overfishing being undertaken for years by the EU fishing fleet. That is correct and we agree; there is no dispute there. However, it can definitely sustain the fishing effort of Irish fishing boats. That is where the priority must be and where the injustice in all this lies. Irish fishermen are complying with the rules and suffering the consequences. Meanwhile, states including the Netherlands, Germany, France and Poland coalesce to protect their own interests and, as we just heard from Deputy Mac Lochlainn, the interests of a very small number of multinational corporations that play hard and fast with the rules, our democracies and in many cases, the rule of law. They vote down safeguards for Ireland and consolidate their advantages in the interests of those few corporations. Deputy Mac Lochlainn has already used parliamentary privilege to name those Dutch corporations and the extraordinary control they exercise over Irish fishing opportunities, over the entire EU process and, if we are being honest, over negotiations between EU and third countries where they also have economic presences. This is something which cuts to the core of our democracy and European democracy.

There are not many people in the Chamber but it should send a chill down the spine of everybody who has any interest in the environment, the rule of law, democracy or fairness. This Government has allowed Irish sovereign natural resources to be effectively gifted, not even by us in Ireland and Irish people but by foreign Governments, that are there for our generation and future generations to private corporations. It is not partnership and the economy, it is an abdication of responsibility and is an affront to our sovereignty as a nation.

The scale of damage is already clear, with a projected loss of 57,000 tonnes of quota in 2026 and an economic hit of up to €200 million per year. There are various ways to quantify the monetary value of this but there are estimates that put this at a fifth of a billion. More than 2,300 jobs are on the line as we face into Christmas and that is not lost on anyone in any coastal community in Ireland. There are families now wondering - skippers and boat owners - how they are going to meet the December repayments on their boats. There are crews scared they will lose income but really, they do not know if they will be fishing or will have a berth on a boat come January. Processing plants are facing closure. There is an idea that we maybe can prevail upon some of these foreign registered trawlers and fishing operations to land their catch here. They will not because they know we have the most extreme sea fisheries protection regime and they can effectively get off scot-free in their own home ports. They are not going to be coming here. Should we really be begging for a scrap from the table?

Through all this, and it is not a criticism that lands on the lap of the Minister of State or that of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, but the absence of leadership from the Taoiseach and Tánaiste

has been glaring and staggering. In other member states, heads of Government intervened directly when national interests were threatened and that leadership was not evident here. As Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, I said this and the committee looked for that. I said it to the Taoiseach last Thursday and asked him to pick up a phone but I would say he did not lift his hand to do anything to support the Minister of State and to have his back in these negotiations and to support, more importantly, our coastal communities.

Ireland has been treated as a soft touch in this and effectively, this Government - Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry Independents - have allowed it to happen. States that describe themselves as partners and say all the nice things to us about solidarity and the European Union, that we are partners and member states and need to relook at our neutrality and step together at European level, voted against us. They gutted us and the Minister of State at these negotiations. They blocked the Hague preferences and stripped away the only modest protection designed to prevent exactly this kind of shock. That is calculated insult heaped on existing injury and demands a response; not quiet disappointment, not expressions of concern and not more hand-wringing. I call for an immediate diplomatic and political response to signal Ireland's disgust on how we have been treated as a sovereign nation. That means formal diplomatic *démarche*. It means calling in the ambassadors of states that have actively undermined Irish fisheries and sovereignty. It means making clear access to Irish waters cannot continue as if nothing has happened. There can be no more business as usual and there are many avenues open to the Minister of State and to this Government, should they choose to go down them, that are within the bounds of the law and which exert economic and political pressure on our so-called partner countries.

Ireland will shortly hold the Presidency of the European Union, which must be used deliberately to untangle and undo this injustice; not to manage it or kick it to touch but to reverse it. At European level, Ireland must reopen discussions with a clear demand for fair burden sharing and the restoration of protections for highly dependent member states such as Ireland. That requires political will from the current Taoiseach. Ultimately, this comes down to political choice. The CFP must be judged not just on stock levels but on fairness and solidarity and at present it is failing on all of that.

Our fishing communities have observed decades of loss. They have been patient and have played by the rules. Their anger, despair and disappointment is justified. The injury is real, the insult is undeniable and what happens next will tell us whether this Government is prepared to stand up for this country or whether it is content to let another vital sector slide towards a fatal end.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá an Rialtas tar éis cliseadh arís is arís eile ar phobail chósta agus ar thionscadail iascaireachta na hÉireann. Léiríonn an géilleadh seo go bhfuil ganntanas iomlán suime ag Fianna Fáil agus Fine Gael maidir le saolta agus slí beatha na n-iascairí. Níor sheas siad suas dóibh riamh agus níl siad ag seasamh suas dóibh anois. Beagnach dhá bhliain ó shin, d'ardaigh mé cás Mhuireann Kavanagh díreach leis an Taoiseach sa Seomra seo. Ní raibh cás riamh chomh soiléir idir cad atá ceart agus mícheart. Is girseach óg í Muireann Kavanagh atá 16 bliain d'aois arb as Árainn Mhór di, oileán amach ar chósta Dhún na nGall. Ba iascaire a bhí ina hathair, ina seanathair agus ina sin-seanathair, agus bíonn Muireann ag iascaireacht fosta. Gabhann sí mangaigh le duán agus dorú. Is é seo an leagan is inbhuanaithe iascaireachta

atá ann ach dúirt an Rialtas léi go riabh a cuid iascaireachta in éadan an dlí. Tá uirthi amharc amach ón seomra leapa in oileán Árann Mhór ar na longa móra as tíortha eile agus iad ag déanamh scrios ar an chothromaíocht atá tar éis na pobail chósta i dTír Chonaill agus ar fud an Stáit seo a chothú ar feadh na mílte bliain. Tá an cuma ar na trálair móra seo ar nós gur cathracha beaga iad, i bhfad níos mó ná na bailte agus na sráidbhailte ar chósta Dhún na nGall. Nuair nach raibh an Rialtas in ann an éagóir in éadan Mhuireann Kavanagh a fheiceáil, ba léir nach mbeadh siad chun seasamh suas di agus dá pobal choíche.

This Government has failed coastal communities and the fishing industry. The latest capitulation is symptomatic of a complete lack of interest from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the way of life and the livelihoods of fishermen and fisherwomen up and down this country. They have never stood up for them and that is the fact. Almost two years ago I stood here and directly put to the Taoiseach the case of young Muireann Kavanagh. Never has there been such a clear case of right and wrong. She is a 16-year-old girl from Arranmore island off the coast of Donegal. Her father, grandfather and great-grandfather were fishermen and Muireann also fishes. She catches pollock with hook and line, the most sustainable way of fishing, but she was told then by the Government that her fishing was illegal. She was forced to watch from her bedroom in Arranmore Island the foreign factory ships destroying the balance that has sustained that coastal community and coastal communities right across the State, in Donegal and elsewhere, for thousands of years. These monster ships look like small cities. They dwarf the towns and villages along the coast of Donegal. A Government that could not see the injustice done to Muireann Kavanagh was never going to stand up for communities like hers. She wanted a future on this island but that future had been denied her.

When I raised this with the Taoiseach at the time he accused me of dishonesty and spin. He said that it was for scientific reasons that Muireann could not fish for pollock with a hook and line. The problem is that there are always winners and losers here. Muireann was the loser and the factory ships were the winners, and in this case here it is the factory ships that are winners, and Irish fishing and coastal communities are the losers. They have again been thrown to the wolves by this Government.

This system is completely rigged, and if Muireann Kavanagh is a problem, then the Government really does not know and does not have fishing communities backs. My colleague, Deputy Mac Lochlainn, outlined blow by blow, the corporate interests and powerful lobbies that are at the heart of Europe, and a compliant Irish Government nodding along. For anyone from a coastal community in Ireland it comes as no surprise that the Government has failed to stand up for them again but the scale of this failure cannot be overstated this time. This is not minor.

The outcome of the most recent EU fisheries Council is catastrophic. The fishing quotas agreement is a dark day for the Irish fishing communities and we are talking about jobs that are going to be lost. We are talking about livelihoods that are on the line. We are now seeing fishing vessels that could be at sea for less than ten days a year and factories that worked for five months a year down to two to three weeks. How can the Government or any Minister not know what this means and stand up for them? This means livelihoods destroyed. It is a hammer blow for coastal communities - communities right along Donegal, from Greencastle down to Killybegs. Jobs are going to be lost. The Common Fisheries Policy, CFP, has been undermined again and again by big businesses allowed to pursue their interests unchecked.

As Deputy McGuinness said, this is not the time to roll over. This is the time to stand up. This is the time to have fishing communities backs. This is the time to stand up for our sovereignty and our rights. This is the time for the Taoiseach to finally show up and make his voice heard on this issue.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I want to speak first on the grave concerns in the fishing industry with the announcement of the new deal from the EU on fishing opportunities for 2026. The loss of 57,000 tonnes of quota will without doubt have a hugely detrimental impact on the over 2,300 jobs in the industry. The Seafood Ireland Alliance has said that it expects somewhere between a €100 million and €200 million loss in value for 2026. Those are staggering figures and will have caused great concern and distress for those working in the sector in recent days. The knock-on effects of this deal will be far-reaching for coastal towns and communities across Ireland. Much like agricultural industries in Ireland, the fisheries sector provides a platform for other sectors beyond its own. Local businesses, suppliers and restaurants will feel the effects of these changes. Costs of produce will increase, as will the cost of transportation and procuring stock. These costs will cause serious difficulties for small businesses and invariably, these increases will be passed on to consumers, and those working in the industry will see figures rise, while their wages continue to remain stagnant.

News coming from the European Union about this deal and the proposed Mercosur does not provide much hope for communities that rely so much on the fisheries and agricultural sectors. When the ordinary worker in these industries and the consumer looks at these proposals, they can rightly wonder whether they are considered in any of the high-up decision-making processes. The Labour Party will work constructively with Government to advocate for a fair and equitable fisheries policy that prioritises the livelihoods of Irish fishermen and fisherwomen and the sustainability of the Marine Institute.

I want to take this opportunity to again raise the issue of the Blackwater fish kill. This was an ecological disaster on a scale we had never seen before in my home town. Anglers across the Munster region and I have little faith that this issue is being taken seriously by the State bodies involved. The River Blackwater was the scene of the greatest fish kill ever seen in this country. In excess of 40,000 fish were killed by a chemical irritant. This led to investigations by Inland Fisheries Ireland, IFI, the EPA, Cork County Council and the Marine Institute. With all these State bodies and local authorities involved, not one had the optimum capacity or resources to identify the chemical. Therefore, the cause of responsibility for the kill has not been found. It is worth noting that although the source of the pollution is still unknown due to the lack of ability to identify the irritant, the North Cork Co-Operative Creamery in Kanturk came under scrutiny after the EPA published the results of a site inspection conducted on the night of the fish kill. The findings revealed that over 362,000 litres of wastewater were discharged into the river within a ten-hour window, with ammonia levels 52 times above the legal limits.

Since then, the creamery has been made to suspend production, due to this and a consistent history of failure to achieve compliance with licensed-discharge conditions. This not just a Kanturk problem or a Cork problem. Issues of pollution must be rigorously investigated and stamped out right across this country. If we are serious about protecting our environment, rivers, fish and wildlife, then enforcement powers must be increased. Never once in this country was an EPA licence taken away. They must be withdrawn if constant pollution

happens. We have had no sanctions or definitive answer for this and, to be frank, it makes a mockery of the idea that we have oversight. The bottom line is that we still do not know what killed upwards of 40,000 fish.

This brings me on to Inland Fisheries Ireland. The programme for Government includes a clear commitment to carry out a full review of Inland Fisheries Ireland. This commitment must now be honoured in full and without further delay. This cannot be allowed to drift on while serious governance issues remain unresolved, complaints go unanswered and staff concerns continue to be raised internally and externally. I am sure the Minister, because he is the Minister, would have seen the meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts two weeks ago. As a member of that committee, it was deeply concerning for me to see basic governance and basic record-keeping were all found wanting. This was not a minor oversight. It was a serious, corporate governance failure. Following an answer to a parliamentary question from me last week, it emerged that seven separate investigations took place within IFI between 2021 and 2025. That is a significant number for an organisation of its size and should immediately raise alarm bells for the Minister and the Department.

The issues I raised include the use of uninsured vehicles and the provision of false documentation to a staff member, which was in turn passed on to An Garda Síochána. These are not trivial matters. They point to a culture where rules are treated as optional and staff are placed in impossible positions because of management failures.

The facts laid before the committee two weeks ago by IFI were absolutely shocking. A staff member of IFI was involved in a car crash in Donegal in August 2021. Following that accident, IFI provided that employee with insurance documentation which it later found out, on 16 November 2021, to be completely inaccurate. Despite knowing this, it failed to inform either the member of staff or An Garda Síochána that the documentation was false. It knowingly allowed a staff member to proceed with paperwork it knew to be invalid. The employee learned that the insurance documentation was invalid only when he received a solicitor's letter from the other party involved in the car crash. This is an appalling way to treat anyone and for anyone to learn that an employer has exposed them to legal and personal risk.

The bottom line is clear. IFI knowingly failed to inform the Garda or its own staff member that a vehicle it had was uninsured. This is disgraceful and completely inexcusable. Workers should never have to endure such an ordeal.

The hearing added even more troubling revelations. The acting chief executive told the committee before the meeting broke that he knew nothing of the findings of the external investigation commissioned by the former Minister, Eamon Ryan. Yet, after the break in the committee meeting, he acknowledged that he was in attendance at the February 2025 board meeting where those findings were presented. While the findings may not have been discussed in detail, he failed to disclose that he knew they had been received. It appeared he believed he could go through the entire committee meeting without acknowledging this. That is simply unacceptable.

At the end of that committee meeting, the former and acting deputy CEO and now head of finance revealed that she had carried out a review of the report that IFI had received in February 2025. I call on the Minister of State to be brave with IFI. Let this be his legacy in the Department of fisheries. He must not let IFI continue in this vein. It has lost my support, it

has lost the support of anglers and it has lost the support of the general public. IFI, as an organisation, needs to be disbanded and built up from the root again because it is a failed organisation. The Minister of State must not put in senior positions of IFI people who have been involved in controversy. This will be the legacy of IFI and of fisheries in this country. This is an opportunity for the Minister of State to get the confidence of anglers back because the confidence of anglers is not there. He must give IFI that opportunity now to build back up to being an organisation that can be trusted by members of the public. As I have said from the outset, the horizon right now does not look bright for those working in the fisheries sector or anglers or those who use our water. However, the Minister of State has the opportunity now to change that. I know he will because I know he wants to. He will do this because he knows that it will have a great effect on this country and on those who use our rivers.

Deputy Ged Nash: I want to draw the Ministers of State's attention to very serious concerns over a multiplicity of issues brought to my attention by fishers I represent at Clogherhead in County Louth. Last month, as the Ministers of State will be aware, a trawler sank off Bettystown. Two Egyptian fishers in difficulty were rescued by the Coast Guard helicopter and the Clogherhead lifeboat. This is not an isolated case; it is the sixth such incident in recent times. There is a very concerning pattern.

Exactly two years ago, an Egyptian fisher lost their life on a capsized vessel, the *Ben Thomas*, off Dunany Point, in Dundalk Bay. The recent Marine Casualty Investigation Board report into the fatal incident is absolutely damning. It says a number of things. Issues involved inadequate safety systems, the failure to wear personal flotation devices, the failure of the life raft to inflate, the delayed activation of the vessel's emergency position indicating radio beacon, the absence of personal locator beacons for crew and prolonged cold water immersion in temperatures of approximately 9°C. The other crew member survived but had hypothermia. A distress signal at the time of sinking was not made. This, obviously, delayed the emergency response. The MCIB report raised concerns about safety management practices, including the lack of documented handover procedures when the vessel changed operators weeks before the incident. Critically, insufficient crew induction and training were a big problem. There was expired safety equipment and the absence of vessel-specific stability awareness. I could go on.

None of this is new to me or to the experienced fishers in Clogherhead. In recent months, local fishers, with whom I have met, people who have fished these waters for generations safely, sustainably and with health and safety at the forefront of their minds, have brought a raft of associated concerns to me about how the fishery in our area is being exploited by vessels with majority non-EEA crews. The Minister of State knows that this is against the regulations. They have serious concerns about how these boats are being operated and about the safety and training of the crew boarding and operating these vessels. They showed me evidence of boats registered to people with no connection whatsoever to and no direct experience in the fishing industry, vessels registered at residential addresses that simply do not stack up. People whose known business is, for example, home refurbishment and other such work are now for some reason registered as trawler owners. The authorities need to ask more serious questions of some of the newer arrivals to the sector.

It is also alleged that on many of these boats, basic health and safety and training and regulatory statutory minimum requirements are not being met, as well as very substantive

claims, in my view, of potential overfishing, routine breaches of working time at sea legislation, and other regulations that put the future of the fishery itself at risk.

I have met this year with representatives from a range of different organisations, including the WRC, the SFPA and the Revenue Commissioners, and I have shared with them some details and the concerns expressed to me by the Clogherhead fishers. An Garda Síochána, frankly, needs to take a serious interest in what is going on too. We are assured that they are all doing their jobs individually and collectively. I know that all the agencies take a risk-based approach and a multi-agency approach to issues in relation to the regulation of the industry. I have some experience of this. One of the last things I did when I was a Minister of State was bring in the new non-EEA permit scheme for migrant fishers in the context of an international journalistic investigation that was going on at the time and that exposed some of the conditions of non-EEA share fishermen operating in the industry, so I am familiar with what happens. I have represented the Clogherhead fishermen for many years. In my view, however, the authorities need to act and need to start asking more difficult, more searching questions based on the information that has been disclosed, not just to me but to them as well. There needs to be evidence and action in terms of the agencies and their response to these issues. They cannot claim ignorance of these issues. There is a pattern of behaviour here and it needs to be properly understood and properly examined.

This very week two years ago, I was supporting members of the Egyptian community in Drogheda who were dealing with their grief when their fellow countryman was taken by the sea off Dunany Point. We need fisheries that are operated well and that favour experienced, skilled operators, many of whom have been working in that fishery for generations, who always play by the rules. We need evidence that work is ongoing such that potential rogue operators will be rooted out. We know that lives have been lost in that fishery in recent years. I refer to the case this time two years ago. Lives were almost lost off Bettystown at the end of November. Lives and honest livelihoods are being put at risk, and the next *Ben Thomas* or the next *Graceful Morning*, the vessel that sank off Bettystown, an occurrence like that, is just around the corner unless the unsafe and, in my view, at times illegal practices that appear to have been tolerated for too long are weeded out. We need to weed those practices out. Doing so is how we properly support the fishers who have been working in those fisheries for many years and who put health and safety and the regulatory environment in which they operate first at all times.

Lives are at risk and action is needed.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I acknowledge the efforts of the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. I have worked with him over the past number of months meeting fishing sector representatives. I know how many times he has travelled back and forth to Europe to try to establish some sort of coalition and get other countries on board for, at the very least, invoking the Hague preferences. He did what he could. He used his vote in the way he should have to try to ensure that the Hague preferences came through but, as we know, there was a betrayal. That is the word he has used. I acknowledge his efforts.

This was a betrayal. The same countries that sought to block this measure, which Ireland has necessarily benefited from in previous years, gained significant access to Irish waters to

the detriment of our own fleet. That is what makes this all the more galling and painful for the Irish fishing sector.

Many species were previously abundant around Irish waters. Because of the Common Fisheries Policy, Ireland has paid a significant price. It has not benefited from the quota share that should have been available to it over previous years. Ireland had a 6% share of the hake quota. Ireland's portion of the haddock quota was at times 10% or lower. The quota for monkfish, which is another species that is caught in Irish waters, was sometimes down at approximately 7%. For sole, which is available off the Irish coast, the quota was approximately 5%. There was also a cut of 40% to the total allowable catch for blue whiting, which was once abundant in Irish waters, because of scientific advice.

It is clear, and I do not think that anyone disagrees, that the CFP has not worked for the fishing sector when we consider the previously rich fishing grounds and abundance of those species in Irish waters. With those smaller quotas, we had at least the ability to invoke Hague preferences and, unfortunately, a few other countries have acted in a certain way. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, has been clear about where he stands. I admire that he has not been afraid to call out those actions. We have not been able to avail of the benefit of the Hague preferences.

I commend the response of those in the fishing sector. While they are probably disappointed, angry and frustrated, they have not once questioned, at least to my knowledge, the scientific advice. They appreciate the importance of protecting these species. They appreciate the importance of protecting the stocks. They know they have to listen to the scientists. What really galls them in this situation is the fact that third nations completely ignore and disregard the scientific advice. That is the core of the issue. EU nations have enjoyed a large quota share, especially for species that are caught in Irish waters. However, the actions of third nations that have pillaged these species and disregarded scientific advice are the real core of the issue. This is important. Of course, I am speaking today on behalf of the fishing sector in west Cork, in places such as Kinsale, Union Hall and Castletownbere, which is impacted by this. I am also speaking as the Minister of State with responsibility for biodiversity. When countries ignore scientific advice, it does not only injure what could be a thriving fishing sector in Ireland but also impacts biodiversity, cetaceans and the marine wildlife that rely on these species.

The pelagic, polyvalent, whitefish and inshore sectors are impacted. We must mention the impact this is going to have on what could be a vibrant, sustainable inshore sector in Ireland. This will be felt throughout the entire sector. When the quotas for species such as mackerel and whiting are cut to such an extent, it causes displacement.

The fishing sector is, rightly, going to have to look for alternative stock and species to catch. This will cause issues throughout the sector. I know the Minister of State is committed. I know he will be meeting the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, as will I, to ensure that adequate financial supports are put in place, as Deputy Mac Lochlainn said, to get them through this incredibly difficult period for the fishing sector.

It is tough because we know that as an island nation with a relatively small fleet, we could have a vibrant, sustainable fishing sector. It could be sustainable in terms of jobs and those

participating in fishing, but also sustainable from a nature and biodiversity point of view. We must call it out: the Common Fisheries Policy is not serving us in that regard.

I again commend the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. I know he has met not just representatives of the fishing sector but also Opposition Members. As he has said at committee and at every stage, he is listening to those in the fishing sector and working for them. He wants to get results for them. He has my full support to ensure that we get the appropriate financial measures and that the task force is supported in identifying what those financial measures are and how they should be distributed. He has my full support. We need this result for coastal communities right around Ireland.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are in a very difficult situation for coastal communities around the whole Irish seaboard. The Fisheries Council has caused absolute devastation. That is all it can be described as. It is going to be catastrophic for the fishing industry over the next year and more. The betrayal of the fishing community has gone on for decades. That is the reality. It is what we hear when we talk to fishers around the coastline, particularly inshore fishers and the people who are struggling to make a living. They are fishing sustainably, as was said earlier, but they are the ones who will bear the brunt of much of this.

It is estimated that 2,500 coastal jobs in the fishing industry are at risk. The immediate danger is there and clear. We are looking at approximately 57,000 tonnes less in the quota, which will mean that almost €100 million will be lost to the industry. The wider economic impact could reach up to €200 million in coastal communities around the entire seaboard, from Howth to Wexford, over to Castletownbere and up to Killybegs. This is a huge impact on rural communities that are struggling the most. That point cannot be lost. It is happening because large vessels are coming in from other counties around Europe. International corporations are driving this. They are sucking up the fish. They are doing it in the most unsustainable way imaginable. The science is telling us that we are now at a stage when much of the fishing stock is depleted to a dangerous degree. Nobody is arguing that point. The problem is that the other sector that is in a catastrophic situation is that of the Irish fisherman and fisherwoman. They are going to suffer as a consequence of the greed of major corporations. That is one of the big problems that many people in Ireland and across Europe have with the European Union. It seems that the rich and powerful can make all the decisions and ordinary people are left to carry the can. It is time these people were left to carry their own bloody can. The ordinary people cannot take it any longer. The fishing communities around the coast cannot take it any longer. They will simply be devastated.

I acknowledge that efforts were made and that the Minister of State feels he was betrayed in all of this. We do not understand why the leaders of the Government, the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, did not step up to the plate. The leaders of other countries in the European Union stood up but our leaders did not. They did not come in strongly to support rural fishing communities around Ireland.

5 o'clock

It is simply going to be devastating if this is allowed to stand. The Minister of State has the support of everyone in the House. We need Government to make a strong stand for fishing communities. Unfortunately that has not happened to date. It has to change. I expect that we will see a change in the new year in how Government approaches this industry and that we will

have the industry's back. Government will step forward and make a strong stand for the communities that have been devastated by the greed of a small number of international corporations, which seem to be more powerful than Ireland when it comes to this.

The concept of the European Union as a place where everyone would work together for the benefit of all seems to be set aside when it comes to these corporate interests. The way they are able to wield their power and the huge lobby they have in Brussels and other places is absolutely devastating for ordinary communities around the country. I also see it in the agriculture sector when it comes to Mercosur. It is the very same thing. The big corporates are driving it forward and to hell with everyone else. Governments have a responsibility to the people who elect them and who need reassurance that they can have a future too and that all cannot be stolen from their plate. I appeal to the Minister of State and the Government to step forward, make that strong stand and recognise the devastation this has for fishing communities and other communities in coastal areas. This is going to affect a serious number of jobs. Our processing industry cannot survive on three or four weeks' work a year. Those factories are simply going to close. This is an opportunity for Government to really show its grit and it must do that.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Irish seas have been sold and our coastal communities are paying the price. Our seas are among our most valuable natural resources, yet they are being exploited under a system that fails to protect coastal communities, marine biodiversity and the long-term sustainability of our fisheries. The presence of Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroe Islands vessels in Irish waters is a stark reminder of how weak our current controls are and how urgently they need reform. Foreign fleets now catch approximately 85% of all fish landed from Irish waters. Despite controlling about 12% of EU waters, Ireland receives less than 6% of the quotas. For decades, successive Governments have treated our fishing industry as expendable. When Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, our marine resources were traded away so that other sectors could benefit. That betrayal unfortunately continues today. Just this week, Irish fishers learned that they will forfeit even more of their already depleted quota, another blow to rural and coastal jobs caused by Government and, particularly, EU indifference and EU deals that serve everyone but us.

At the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting last week, a deal was struck that will see Ireland lose 57,000 tonnes of quota for 2026, a loss valued at around €94 million rising to €200 million in knock-on effects, threatening approximately 2,300 coastal jobs. These foreign fleets often target high-value species like blue whiting and mackerel, operating under quota arrangements negotiated at EU level. While these deals are presented as reciprocal, the reality is that Ireland gains little compared to what we give away. Our own fishers face strict quotas and shrinking margins while foreign super trawlers, some the size of football pitches, extract enormous volumes of fish from Irish waters. This is not just an economic injustice; this is an environmental and a social one. Industrial-scale fishing puts pressure on stocks, disrupts ecosystems and undermines the sustainability commitments we claim to uphold. The Hague preferences, which exist to protect our fleet when there are periods of severe quota downturn, should have been invoked for Ireland at this meeting. I acknowledge the work the Minister of State has done at Europe to try to get our neighbours to invoke them. As others have said, unfortunately he could have done with more support from more senior levels but I appreciate the work he put into it. The triggering criteria were met for the Hague preferences, yet a group

of EU member states with larger fishing fleets than Ireland blocked it. This represents the first time the Hague preferences were blocked in 50 years, blocked by our neighbours.

This is an issue of sovereignty and fairness. Coastal communities in Donegal, Galway and Cork depend on fishing for livelihoods, yet they are squeezed by policies that prioritise corporate interests and international deals over local resilience. Rural Ireland is hollowing out. Clubs cannot field teams and young people are emigrating because Government after Government has sacrificed fisheries for short-term gain. Better controls do not have to equal isolationism. We need stricter monitoring of foreign vessels, real-time reporting of catches, and enforcement that ensures compliance with sustainability standards. Ireland should push for renegotiation of quota sharing arrangements so that benefits flow back to Irish communities, not just to multinational operators. Investments in our own processing capacity and small-scale fisheries would create jobs and keep value local, rather than exporting it along with the fish. At a time climate and biodiversity crises demand urgent action, continuing to allow industrial fleets unfettered access is indefensible. Ireland must stand up for its marine resources, its workers and its environment. Stronger controls are not just a policy choice; they are a matter of justice. The survival of our coastal communities relies on them. We need to see a return of the Hague preferences to Ireland and we need to see it now. We really cannot accept this from Europe and I hope the Minister of State will fight very strongly for that.

I also want to discuss what really underpins our fisheries, though. It would be remiss not to do so. Earlier this week a TD said that one of the problems is that for the first time, Europe has actually accepted the scientific advice that was given to it, which squeezed the quotas even further. For years, Europe has not accepted the scientific advice and has given out quotas that were way larger than what populations could withstand. That is one of the reasons we are in this situation. There are biological limits as to what we can fish. When Europe is estimating the overall number and quota of fish, it absolutely has to be led by science in that regard. Within that framework and the umbrella of what is available, Ireland has never received its fair share of that quota. However, I absolutely accept that there needs to be a quota system that stays within the biological limits of the populations because it just makes sense. If we overfish and there are not enough mature fish in a population, there will not be enough young fish coming along. That is a key element. What we are witnessing now is the impact of overfishing by all countries. Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland have access to those stocks as well. We are being squeezed from that perspective and it is regrettable. For years we have ignored pure population realities when it comes to fish stocks.

One of the impacts we are going to see from this, which the Minister of State mentioned, is the squeezing of our inshore fisheries. We have to be really conscious of that. I understand the Government is coming up with a package that will be available and very welcome for the larger fishers. It is really important that inshore fisheries and people who fish inshore are protected and that there is not a further reduction of what is available to them because they are already being squeezed. We are very aware of that.

It is way past time that we see the marine protected area legislation. It has been promised for a long time. I know the process has been changed and it will be pulled in under the designated maritime area plan, DMAP, legislation, which I do not agree with. We really need movement on that legislation. Only through marine protected areas will we protect our fish, fish stocks and our inshore and offshore fishers. That is the only way. If we do not have fish,

there will be no fishermen. That is just the reality. It is really important that those inshore fishers are incorporated when the legislation is being developed and that it is very much a partnership with them.

Similar to when we talk about farmers, they are the ones who are the custodians of our marine resource. They are the ones who have the knowledge. When I chat to fishermen and hear their stories, they are so in tune with what happens at sea and what is happening with different stocks. They can give the reasons for the changes in the different stocks and the shifts in the dynamics. It is important that we work with them. There is a cultural element to this. For inshore fishers and the islanders, it is a core part of who we are and who we were. As a nation, we have turned our face away from the marine far too much. We need to start appreciating and valuing our marine resources and making sure they will be available not just to this generation of fishers but also to the generation after and the generation after that. There is so much of our cultural heritage tied up in those communities. We cannot allow them to be diminished any further than they are.

The Minister of State may be able to fill us in when he is responding, but we need to know when the marine protected area legislation is coming to the committee and when we can start the engagement with the different stakeholders on it. There are so many examples we can look at where it was done well and so many examples where it was not done well. It is important to learn from other countries. Interestingly, I have engaged a little with some people in the marine sector in Florida. A simple change in the size of particular fish that were eligible to be caught has resulted in such life being brought back to the coast of Florida that it is just incredible. This was driven by anglers. They pushed for this legislation. The state is now able to free up or lessen that regulation a little bit because it has brought those seas back to life. That is the thing; we need to look at MPAs in some instances as more of a short-term or emergency measure to allow those areas to get back to where they were and then, potentially, look to allowing more fishing or other activities in. We need to deal with this like it is an emergency because it is from a biodiversity and nature perspective and from a tourism perspective. We are seeing now that the way of life of fishers who rely on this for their livelihoods, as their fathers and fathers and fathers and fathers did, is at risk. It is important that we protect it. The marine protected area Bill is the way to do that.

I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's comments. I acknowledge the work he has done. I know he went over there with the absolute intention of being firm and strong and winning that debate. It appears, unfortunately, that our European neighbours were not willing to work with us on that, but there are other things we can do to push it as much as we can.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I recognise in the Gallery the representatives of the sector, including the Irish Fish Producers Organisation, IFPO; the Irish South and East Fish Producers Organisation, ISEFPO; and the Irish Fish Processors and Exporters Association, IFPEA. They are here this evening and that is significant. They are extremely concerned. They spent most of last week in Brussels. They were there when the Minister of State met with them prior to the Council and during the Council to brief them fully.

I want to clear up this one. As a result of the presentation by the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA, at the Joint Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs a few weeks ago, I felt it necessary to table a question to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It

would have been dealt with in the office of the Minister of State with responsibility for the marine, Deputy Dooley. I asked about the plans to review the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006 in view of the appearance of the SFPA before the joint committee. I wanted an answer to my question about the review or overhaul of the Act. The reply I received did not deal with the question. Instead, it told me everything I already knew about the SFPA. I ask the Minister of State to insist that his staff in the Department deal with the question that is asked. I will leave it at that.

This has been a very black week. It is going to be a black year for the Irish fishing sector in 2026 with the drastic reduction in the quotas of demersal and pelagic fish. Why are we in this position? Of course there is overfishing. There is no overfishing by this country. Having been involved in fisheries in the processing sector, as Minister of State and as a TD for Donegal, I can put my hand on my heart and say I have never witnessed any quantity of blackfish being landed. The industry knows that if it lands blackfish, it reduces the value of all the other fish, so it is careful enough to ensure that does not happen. As others have pointed out, those who are responsible for this now are Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and the United Kingdom. We sat in this Chamber and listened attentively to Michel Barnier when he spoke about Brexit and emphasised the importance of Ireland remaining in the EU and the loss to the UK of not remaining in the EU. It may have been a loss generally to the UK, but it is a major advantage to its fishing sector that it is now outside of the EU. The result of that is fish valued at hundreds of thousands of euro. When I met the former Commissioner in the dining room here afterwards, I put it to him that I was extremely concerned for the future of this sector. He told me, in his capacity as the chief negotiator between Europe and the UK, I could be absolutely sure that fish and trade would be inextricably linked, and fish would be protected. I was naive enough, even then, to believe the man. He obviously had a French hat on rather than the European hat of someone working in the interest of all the European countries.

I listened to my Donegal colleague, Deputy Mac Lochlainn, naming a number of companies in Europe. I took the opportunity to ring the office of Parlevliet in Holland - I have had the number for a long time - and I said I wanted to speak to them. They came back to me very quickly and gave me an email address. I will be expressing my views. They are in business, which means they are out to look after their own interests. I take the view that this is a monopoly. There should be some European commission that could look at how a company from a certain country can go into the countries at the other end of Europe - Poland and elsewhere - and have a quota that is much greater than that of many of large European states. There is a monopoly, whether it be Parlevliet, Van der Plas or Van der Zwan, all of which I knew in a former life.

There is a misconception about the Hague preferences, which were first introduced in 1976. We remember that they had to be invoked over the years, but that was only since 1988. The Hague preferences were included in the total allowed and the quotas for Ireland until 1988. After that, they had to be invoked. I recall in 2004 and 2006 having to travel to the UK in advance of Council meetings to prevail upon Ben Bradshaw, who had the fisheries portfolio at that time and with whom I had a good relationship. Things have changed so much since then.

We are having difficulties with foreign vessels coming into this country. I want to demonstrate and I want the Minister of State to demonstrate to our European colleagues that

Ireland takes its fishing seriously and takes conservation seriously. The Government needs to make it clear that no common control plan will be renewed for Belgium or France in 2026.

They will have to weigh each and every fish on the piers and at the harbours in the same way our people have to. It is a Common Fisheries Policy. I ask the Minister of State to direct as policy that all factory vessels fishing in our waters will be subject to the same CCTV recording as Irish vessels. When our fish are weighed, they are largely weighed in 10 kg boxes or blocks. They should be weighed under the same regulations on those vessels but what are those fishers doing? They are putting in 22 or 23 boxes so, instead of landing of 100%, they are landing 110% or 120%. It is not good enough. They are circumventing EU rules. We must ensure there are CCTV cameras on those vessels as well and that we have access to them. It should be remembered that, as of 1 January next, all of the records in our factories have to be maintained for a period of six months.

As a matter of policy, Ireland must stop swapping our kilowatt days to other countries, especially in the whitefish segment. This allows those countries to increase their fishing efforts in our waters. A national policy needs to be put in place that provides better monitoring and oversight of Belgian beamers fishing in the Irish sea and Dutch factory ships fishing scad, horse mackerel, off the west coast. These vessels are recording zero bycatches. That is bizarre. How can they be recording that? These are the countries that are overfishing. Ireland needs to progress more conservation of areas, including the closure of nephrops grounds during spawning periods. A closure for the horse mackerel spawning period needs to be considered to preserve stocks. When it comes to issues affecting fish stocks, we are not the culprits.

As I referred to at the start, I am disappointed. Was it a question of efficiency or a deliberate decision to ignore the question I asked? I believe I speak for all of my colleagues on the fisheries committee when I say there should be a full and complete reform of the SFPA. That is urgently required. What is a minor offence in Europe is a criminal offence here. When I came back into this House again in 2016, I saw a statutory instrument affecting penalty points being laid before the House. I will not go into the detail but I pioneered the overturning of that instrument, a first in the history of this State and of this House. I got that through this House. Of course, my back was not out the door when my own party went into government in 2020. I will speak about one of the first things that was done. The file was presented to two Ministers, who were unfortunately only in place for a short time. I refer to Barry Cowen and the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary. They did not deal with it. They wanted to find a political solution. However, the leader of my party, who was acting as Minister for fisheries in the intervening period, had the file put under his nose and signed it, overturning the earlier decision. I do not know who will be here the longest but I doubt whoever it is will ever see a statutory instrument being overturned in the way I pioneered. What was done was wrong and I cannot blame anyone but those in my party. We need to set up a new office to engage with the European Commission. I recommend that to the Minister of State.

The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, referred to the establishment of a working group. I know he worked very hard and made tremendous efforts. He met various ministers in Europe and contacted others. However, he was not successful. Those are the very same people who should be seen to help the smaller countries but they are taking advantage of the oceans off the coast of Ireland. The Minister of State is setting up a working group under the auspices of Food Vision 2030 to develop a framework of supports. As we have said all along, it is not

funding we need but fish. We are now in a dire situation. All of those in the industry, whether producers, processors or those working in the factories, need to be represented. I also recommended that the Minister of State should get the banks involved, if possible. The banks must now freeze any repayments that fishermen are unable to pay. These will build up with interest and the banks have a duty to assist. They did enough damage over the years in making money available to those who possibly should not have got it in other sectors. The Minister of State should do that. I am glad to hear that he has recommended the appointment of a chairman and that all of the sectors will be involved. Those who are working in the factories should also be involved in this.

I will give the Minister of State the facts. As a result of the Brexit deal, we lost 26% of the value of our quotas overnight in December 2020. I made reference to Michel Barnier, who was largely responsible for that, but I do not blame him alone. I blame the Government of the day and the Ministers of that time, whether the Minister for Foreign Affairs or the Minister for the marine. They should never have allowed that to happen. They did it in the interests of mother Ireland but, for the second or perhaps umpteenth time, they threw the fishing sector under the bus. We entered the European Union in 1973. Of course, over the years, we have had major benefits as a result, culminating in the opening of a market of over 500 million people for the export of our goods and services, but who paid the price? The fishing industry paid the price then and it is now paying the price once more.

There is a Council meeting tomorrow. I know it is all arranged in advance but, as I have said before, even though the agenda has been set, when the Taoiseach goes to Brussels tomorrow, he should raise this issue with his counterparts from all of the European states under any other business. That would indicate the importance of the matter. I have also tabled a question to the Taoiseach to find out who he contacted prior to the decision on fisheries because he did say that he would make efforts to make contact. I know what the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, has done. I will get a reply to a parliamentary question to him but I am also awaiting a reply from the Taoiseach as to whom he contacted. Did he contact the Danes, who hold the Presidency? What other countries did he contact? If that had happened, they may have taken a different attitude.

It is very unfair that a blocking minority of a few of the larger countries can block us from getting the Hague preferences. They have been in place since 1976 and never had to be invoked because, from 1976 to 1988, they were always included in the TAC. That was also the case from 1988 onwards. As I have said, I had experience of that in the past.

Some will say that we will have the Presidency next year and that we will review the Common Fisheries Policy. We can talk about reviews but reviews will end up in the same percentage of the cake going to the various countries involved. The Minister of State mentioned something. I hope he will put it on the table. We should try it. However, I have seen reviews, including mid-term reviews, come and go without any iota of change being made.

Tá áthas orm an deis seo a fháil chun an cheist thábhachtach seo a phlé, cé gur phléigh muid í i gcoiste na n-iascach ag tús na seachtaine. Beidh muidne ag cur béime ar an cheist seo thar ceann thionscal na hiascaireachta, na n-iascairí, na monarchana, na ndaoine atá ag obair sna monarchana agus na ndaoine eile atá ag brath ar thionscal na hiascaireachta. Beimid ag coinneáil súil ghéar ar an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Timmy Dooley, agus ag tabhairt lán-tacaíochta dó agus é ag déanamh a dhícheall thar ceann an tionscail seo.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What we have seen over the past few weeks is an absolute and abject failure of the Common Fisheries Policy.

Even the 1996 Hague preferences have failed. That was the very mechanism that was set up to guarantee Ireland a minimum level of fish to catch in our own waters. That is what it would have meant. However, France, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands banded together to ensure that not even a boat could be taken on it. The truth is that Ireland's fishing industry has suffered a death by a thousand cuts. I come from Mayo, a huge coastal county. I have watched it over the years. Along with the fishing families, I have watched huge trawlers behave absolutely recklessly because they were legally allowed to do it. Then, we have the criminalisation of fishermen and fishing families at the same time. What has happened here should not be a surprise to us but it is an absolute shock. It is a shock to the system and it is a shock that has to be corrected. The truth is that the EU has failed Ireland's fishing industry repeatedly but so has the Government. The EU got used to successive governments allowing it to happen over and over again. As Sinn Féin's fisheries spokesperson, Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, said earlier, the EU-based corporations were allegedly complicit in investing in fleets in third countries and benefiting from inflated quotas while fishing families and fishing communities here have to suffer. We need a radical reset of the fishing industry and of fishing across the board.

I also take the opportunity to tell the Minister of State what is happening and to ask him to come to Mayo to meet with the anglers and the draft net licence holders there. What Government is attempting to do is to put an absolute blanket ban on fishing. Even if we take the Moy complex of 60 miles of rivers, 12 fisheries, 115 rivers and 20 lakes, will the Minister of State put what he is proposing to do for the coming season on hold to have proper consultation with the fishermen and the tourism bodies and to have a proper impact assessment on what he is proposing to do there? Will he please put it on hold while this consultation takes place to hear the severe impact this would have? It cannot be allowed to happen.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Irish fishing industry and coastal communities are well-used to being the whipping boy over many years and much of this has been put on record. Taking the statement from the Seafood Ireland Alliance, it states that the EU Fisheries Council deal was "a betrayal of Ireland's fishing industry". One of the alliance members said that "the failure delivers a €94 million hit and threatens the survival of many Irish vessels and seafood businesses" and that "the consequences will be catastrophic". The alliance reports that the Irish fishing industry will have 57,000 tonnes less quota to fish in 2026 and is now at risk. It said over 2,300 jobs in coastal communities face immediate danger and the wider impacts could reach €200 million loss next year. As another of its members stated: "Non-EU states ignored science and inflated their catches. They created this crisis. Ireland fished responsibly, yet we now carry what are proportionately the heaviest losses." Another said that "less quota means less fish and less work" and that "many plants may not survive this blow without raw material" while another stated that "we now have a situation when our fleet of fishing vessels are left with 28 tonnes of sole to catch in 2026 on the south coast of Ireland, when Belgium has 450 tonnes." The alliance statement concluded by saying: "Once again as in Brexit, Ireland has been left carrying a burden created by others. This is unjust and shows the European Union in a very bad light in its failure to protect the interests of small Member States."

Deputy Conway-Walsh asked what the Minister of State is going to do. What we have here is abject failure. Whether I am talking about those who fish out of Dundalk or those in Clogherhead, we are looking at absolute disaster. This is ground zero and we need an answer. There has been abject failure by the European Union and the Government needs to stand up. At this point, these people's backs are to the wall and they need some element of support.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I welcome representatives from the fishing industry who are here in the Gallery today, particularly John Lynch from Howth. The Fisheries Council meeting which took place in Brussels last week can be described as nothing short of a disaster for Ireland's fishing industry. It is extremely important that we put into perspective how much Irish society relies on the fishing industry. More than 15,000 people are working in the seafood sector, there are 101 seafood processors, and the industry contributes €1.3 billion to our economy annually. Critically, it provides Irish people with food security. Those who work in our seafood sector, be it on the water itself or in the processing sector on land, ensure Irish people have reliable and consistent access to food. We can not underestimate the importance of this, given the current geopolitical climate and the weaponisation of food in some corners of the globe. The outcome of the Fisheries Council places all of this at risk.

Fishing organisations estimate that the EU fishing quotas could cost up to 2,300 jobs. What are these people to do? The fishing industry is all they know. Are they expected to learn a new trade and no longer follow their family's tradition? What will this cost the State when these people have no access to income and must seek assistance from the Department of Social Protection? What destruction will this cause to coastal communities right across Ireland? The industry will have approximately 57,000 tonnes less to fish next year and is facing a quota reduction to the value of €94 million and a possible loss of €200 million when we consider processing, logistics and export. This is simply devastating. We must be honest here and call out the countries which orchestrated this attack on Ireland. Clearly, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Belgium, Latvia and Denmark have their fingerprints all over this orchestrated attack on the Irish fishing industry. These larger countries are attempting to bully Ireland and we must not let them. Let us not forget that these are the countries that have benefited the most from Ireland paying 40% of the transfers to the UK to retain access to UK waters in the aftermath of Brexit. We must have a return as a matter of urgency to the Hague preferences and we must stand up to these countries and to Europe. The European Commission has failed to uphold its obligation to deliver an agreed and balanced outcome and has offered no support to a smaller member state such as Ireland that has been effectively overpowered by a dominant blocking minority.

I urge the Minister and the Taoiseach to consider formally writing to the Commission or the President of the Council to restate that the Hague preferences form an integral part of the Common Fisheries Policy. The Hague preferences were designed to provide Ireland with safeguards in the event of declining fish stocks in return for permitting other member states to fish within Ireland's EEZ. That understanding has now been undermined and Ireland should notify the Commission that, as a consequence, the Common Fishery Policy will cease to apply from 1 January 2026, with Irish waters closed to all states other than the UK from that date. Responsibility for the mackerel dispute rests squarely with Norway, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Russia, all of which have unilaterally set mackerel quotas far in excess of their historical entitlements. The Commission has repeatedly failed to address this situation by not leveraging

access to EU markets as an effective means of enforcement. Our permanent representation in Brussels also has to stand up and fight this.

We also have to properly equip our Defence Forces so that they have the real, practical capacity to prevent overfishing. This means ensuring our Naval Service has the vessels, technology and personnel required to patrol our waters effectively, enforce quotas and hold those who are breaking the rules to account.

If we are serious about the sustainability of the fishing industry, about protecting fish stocks for future generations, and about defending the livelihoods of our coastal communities, then enforcement cannot be an afterthought. We must consider all of our options here and not allow ourselves to be bullied by a minority group who think they can throw their weight around. The industry will be decimated otherwise. Thousands of jobs are at risk here. We owe it to those people to act and to ensure that their livelihoods are protected.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate. At the outset, I acknowledge the huge efforts the Minister of State made personally, along with his team, in the negotiation field in the past few weeks. Every effort was made by the Minister of State and his team to try to get a good deal for Ireland. What has really happened here is a ganging up of other European countries. We often talk in this political arena about how there can be paralysis of decision-making in the United Nations and in that whole political sphere.

When it comes to fishing, there certainly was a ganging-up against Irish fishermen the other night. Neither the State, the Minister of State nor his Department can be faulted for that. What is at stake here is very serious. If we are to believe the analysis of the past few days, the fallout of this could see up to one in seven jobs in fishing being lost, with a €94 million loss and a huge shock to the industry overall.

Several things are happening in the sphere of agri-fisheries at the moment. The nitrates derogation has been extended for a three-year period. The Mercosur deal will potentially be voted on in the coming days. I am no expert whatsoever on fisheries. We need the context as to where this development fits with all the other issues that are subject to negotiation at this time. There is a real fear among the farming community that in spite of Ireland saying vociferously time and again that it has a whole set of concerns regarding Mercosur, the position still is not clear. There is even some talk that member states could vote on it by the end of the week.

To put Mercosur in context, 85% of farming in my county of Clare is based on suckler beef. It is the beef heartland of Ireland. As the Minister of State knows well, most cattle reared in County Clare are on pasture for seven or eight months of the year before being housed and fed silage concentrates or hay, although the latter is less common these days. This produces a superior quality of animal. There are Bord Bia checks, annual tuberculosis tests and genomic testing. A high-quality, healthy, environmentally produced beef animal then enters the food chain after approximately two years.

That contrasts very sharply with the type of animal being reared in the South American system, where rainforests are being felled *en masse*, artificially creating pasture where it never existed, and cattle are housed for month upon month and fed with grain and concentrate, fattening them artificially to get a higher market price. None of that sits congruently with the

Irish system of a grass-fed animal making its way through the local mart as a weanling, then being fattened up and entering the beef chain after two years. It is wrong under any lens, whether the lens of quality of beef or the environmental lens, that Ireland should even consider signing up to the Mercosur deal.

Everything is of consequence here. A good deal was struck for Ireland in the past few days on the nitrates directive. Then we were sold a pup by other European states in terms of fishing quotas. In a matter of days, potentially, if it is not postponed until February, we will have a vote on Mercosur. I asked earlier at Questions on Policy or Legislation what Ireland's position is on Mercosur and, in particular, how these three different negotiated schemes fit together. People will say they are separate, as they undoubtedly are, but that is not how European politics works. Different member states will have their advisers, ministers and negotiating teams horse trading in these negotiations. Given where we had been at with the nitrates directive and where the fisheries deal ended up landing despite everyone's best efforts, I fear we will sign up to Mercosur. I strongly caution against it.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I stood with colleagues across the House two short months ago to ask the Minister of State to ensure the Government would start standing up to the EU and demanding fairness and justice for Irish fishing communities. Following the recent outcome of the EU's Agriculture and Fisheries Council, that demand is clearly being put to the test. This outcome is disastrous for our fishing industry. We need the Government to protect our fishermen and coastal communities, particularly those in the west, which is already recognised by the EU as a region that is underdeveloped and lagging behind other parts of Europe.

In real terms, we are looking at vessels that could be at sea for fewer than ten or 12 days a year and factories that once worked three to five months a year down to two or three weeks. Fish processing is a major employer in Galway, particularly in Connemara, and this would have a devastating effect on jobs in an area that is already struggling in terms of employment. Fishers in Galway are looking for the Government to expand the quota. This outcome would do just the opposite. We cannot afford to take this without a fight.

Bhí an tAire Stáit atá freagrach as an iascaireacht i Ros an Mhíl le déanaí liom féin agus le daoine eile agus is eol dó cé chomh tábhachtach atá cúrsaí iascaireachta in iarthar na hÉireann, i gConamara agus ar na hoileáin amach ón gcósta. Tá a fhios againn go mbeadh sé uafásach dá gcuirfí na hathruithe seo ar chuala muid fúthu ón Aontas Eorpach i bhfeidhm. Tá sé thar am don Rialtas seo agus don Aire Stáit seasamh suas don Aontas Eorpach ar mhaithe leis na ceantair atá ag brath ar iascaireacht agus ar mhaithe leis na hiascairí iad féin agus a gcuid teaghlach. Tá sé fiorthábhachtach go ndéanfadh an tAire Stáit chuile shórt gur féidir leis chun an bealach maireachtála seo a chosaint chomh maith leis an eacnamaíocht atá ag brath air, is é sin, an eacnamaíocht ar fud iarthar na hÉireann agus ar an gcósta. Impím ar an Aire Stáit chuile shórt gur féidir leis a dhéanamh chun a chinntiú nach gcuirtear na hathruithe seo i bhfeidhm.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: The EU has failed Ireland's fishing industry repeatedly and we are once more paying the price for the chronic overfishing of shared stocks by big boats from third countries. The recent EU fisheries deal from Brussels is a betrayal of the fishing industry and has been described as catastrophic. We are talking about 2,300 community jobs in coastal communities, including in Arklow and Courtown, being in immediate danger. The

Seafood Ireland Alliance has estimated a loss of €94 million to our fishing industry, with wider economic impacts reaching up to €200 million by next year.

We need a radical reset of the meek approach of the Government. The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste must urgently intervene to make it clear Ireland will not stand for this. We need to know whether the Government, for once, will stand up for Ireland and passionately represent the interests of Ireland in the EU, not the other way around of slavishly representing the EU's interests in Ireland. We are an island and a seafaring nation, with our people travelling as far away as Iceland for more than 1,000 years. Following last Saturday's Brussels sellout, this is the darkest hour for the Irish fishing industry.

I have often referred in this Chamber to Arklow fisherman CJ Gaffney and his family. Their situation typifies the Government's do-nothing approach. A family and their livelihood are destroyed and this has been going on for 16 years. There was repeated advice that there are funds available to compensate them but that the Government must draw them down. Seven successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments have been repeatedly requested to do so but, it seems, they simply did not want to draw down the funds. One might ask why. It would cost the Government nothing to do so. Is it because it might highlight the lack of interest of the previous seven Governments and previous Ministers? I do not know. I will leave that for others to decide.

I am looking across at the bronze statues of people I assume we are supposed to be honouring in this Chamber. I see Cathal Brugha in front of me, Pádraig Pearse trasna anseo, Tom Clarke trasna ansin agus ar an taobh eile uaimse, James Connolly. I wonder what they would think of an approach that always seems to be about selling Ireland short or selling it out. Ceapaim go mbeadh náire orthu.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome to the Gallery representatives of the fishing sector. I see Patrick Murphy, whom I met on Sunday, and others there. They have always had the heart of the fisherman at the forefront of their efforts. Fishers are going through a dreadful situation. The previous speaker referred to a sellout but, in fact, we did not sell out; what we had was taken away from us. If we got something for it, that might be something, but we did not.

We find ourselves in a farcical situation and it has been heading that way for a long time. It has been going that way since I came into the House ten years ago. We have been turning a blind eye to small things like fuel rebates. We were calling for action and asking the Minister to look for it in Europe. No chance of that. Why bother? We are letting on to be the weak link in Europe in relation to fishing. I was very pleased when the Minister of State was appointed to his role with responsibility for fisheries. I always see huge potential in regard to fishing and I always felt fishers were thrown to the dogs but I welcomed his appointment. I know he was out there fighting his case last week but the question must be asked as to where the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister were. The Minister of State cannot stand on his own in these incredibly difficult times. When the power of the mighty is hanging like a rod over his head, it is impossible to do this on his own.

They were missing in action. That is basically what happened. I know the Minister of State cannot agree with me, but they are the facts. I have been saying it for long enough here. I said it during Brexit when Barnier - to be honest, he does not deserve to be called by his first name - pulled a fast stroke on us. I pleaded with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste at the time to enter into

negotiations on behalf of Ireland. It should have been the leadership of this country and not thrown over to a Frenchman to look after Irish fishing interests. We knew where that was going to go, as we all found out.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle and the Chief Whip for allowing this debate, which I immediately sought on Friday night. We sent an e-mail and in fairness, over the weekend the Chief Whip and the Ceann Comhairle worked towards making sure that there was a debate and to give people a chance. Like I said yesterday, even the dogs in the street know that Ireland has always been badly treated by Europe when it comes to its fishermen. *Déjà vu* is once again upon us, whereby the Christmas present from Europe is the betrayal of our coastal communities. I was here when Michel Barnier gave us his word that Ireland would get a fair deal from the Brexit negotiations. As we know, he was the one who threw us under the bus. I think he has done it again this time.

What we seem to forget is that the Government of the day signed up to it warning that a "No" deal was worse, but the problem for our coastal communities is that it could not be worse. We were an island nation rich with fish. Once fish were swimming up to the rocks all around our island, supporting the thousands of fishing families. Boats were on every island and filling coastal piers. This was the picture when we joined Europe in 1973. In 1976, our so-called friends in Europe set about drafting a plan, which is now known as the Common Fisheries Policy. They told us that we must regulate the fishing fleets of Europe to - guess what - protect these valuable fish stocks. They asked each country to record the fish that every fisherman was catching, while the others were already hoovering up the fish in our waters. The result was that we the Irish, with our seas full of our fish, made it so our fishermen stayed at home. We did not need to travel very far to fill our boats, only 12 miles out from our rugged shoreline. Foreign vessels were also fishing and filling their boats and sailing home out of Irish fishing grounds with Irish fish. When the figures that were collected were analysed, Ireland had little or nothing in comparison to the visiting fleets, which had it all. They said we would have to be given the opportunity to build and grow. Was that not nice of them? They set quotas to protect our abundant seas and that changed to total allowable catch, limiting each fleet to their historic records. They promised us it would ensure we would all have plenty of fish if we followed the rules. Relative stability was created. This was introduced for the benefit of coastal communities. Figures and percentages were set. They told us that when the number of fish increased, the fishermen would get to catch more. Ireland and England were given an assurance that if the plentiful stocks decreased due to overfishing, we would not suffer the same cuts as those visiting our waters, especially when they had the bigger share to begin with. They called this the Hague preferences. All agreed that this was necessary to ensure once again the relative stability for the island nations that gave access to the other foreign fleets into their sovereign waters.

The Minister of State should stop me if I am wrong. This was the reality for 49 years until last Friday. Now Belgian beam trawlers can leave their ports, enter Irish waters and take home 400 tonnes of black sole, while our fishermen get 28 tonnes. Like I said, it is *déjà vu*: English fishermen after Brexit got 99% of Irish sea herring and we got a miserable 1%.

I have some questions for the Minister of State. Will he stand with Irish fishermen and their families that go back generations? They have lost loved ones to the sea. Will he stand with those in our coastal communities who earn their living from the fish landed by our hard-

working, brave and honest fishermen? Will he challenge this wrong, once and for all, and put his own people first? Does he and this Government even want us to have a fishing fleet going forward? Given that the Hague preferences were formally invoked by Ireland, lawfully blocked by a minority number of four member states, and resulted in severe quota losses for Irish fishing communities, will the Minister of State accept the political responsibility for the outcome of those negotiations and outline what he will do differently to ensure this situation is reversed?

Will the Minister of State confirm that he and his officials formally invoked the Hague preferences? Could he tell us who blocked them, the minority of four member states and the cost that will fall on our country? What action did he take at Council level once it became clear that Ireland's legal safeguard was being denied? Is it not true that foreign countries are already benefiting to the tune of 85% of the stocks in Ireland's waters, and will this now increase? This is what I call theft: the application of the Hague preferences was to prevent a disproportionate impact on Ireland's pelagic and small-scale fishing fleets. Now we know the cuts are even greater, what will he do for our fishermen to stop them from losing their livelihoods and Ireland from losing its fish supply?

Independent Ireland calls on the Minister of State and his Department to immediately look at the socio-economic impact this will have, not just on Ireland's seafood industry but on each category of vessel, based on its size, and the individual opportunities for the coming year, 2026. Now that it is established without doubt that the Common Fisheries Policy has failed in its legal obligations to the people of Ireland, will the Minister of State seek compensation from Europe for our coastal communities that are most dependent on these stocks, and that have been decimated by the fleets pillaging our waters? Does he believe, as I do, that we have the right to retain a viable, sustainable fishing industry, or is it the right of mainland member states to take so much that it destroys the resource itself?

My final questions relate to why some countries with so little to lose stood against us. In the Minister of State's meeting with his Polish colleague, did he give an explanation as to why for the first time in 49 years, they chose in 2026 to deny our right to invoke the Hague preferences?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have very little time. This has to be appealed in every court in our land and in Europe. We have to stand up to them. It is up to the Minister of State. It is up to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. It is up to this Government to now stand with Irish fishermen. If it does not, and we see that happen in the next month, it will be an abject failure and the Government will be to blame.

Deputy Paul Lawless: This has been one of the worst deals in living memory when it comes to the Common Fisheries Policy. Irish fish are effectively being stolen by the European Union, which is what is happening. We are on the periphery of Europe. We have ceded so much ground to our counterparts across Europe. Some 57,000 tonnes of quota will be lost to Irish fishermen next year, which will affect more than 2,000 jobs.

I was very concerned when I heard the Minister of State's statement about going to the national Exchequer for a compensation scheme. Our first priority must be to go back to Europe and, if necessary, to initiate legal proceedings in the European Court of Justice to ensure the Hague preferences are guaranteed. We must protect fishers, our indigenous sector and the coastline. A compensation scheme may be necessary but I urge him as a first step to work across Europe to gain support and to issue legal proceedings in this regard. We cannot and must not accept this. Irish fishermen would be better off to register as Belgians, Dutch, Germans or French and to fly their flags over their vessels than our own, in our own waters. I spoke to a fisherman yesterday who said his vessel will be docked in the harbour while he watches the Germans and the French come in with their vessels, take our fish and load their articulated trucks and go back to Europe. That is what is happening. That is what happened last Friday night. It is unacceptable. I urge the Minister of State to fight for our coastal communities. There is a 70% reduction in mackerel, a 41% reduction in blue whiting and a 22% reduction in boarfish. What makes this so egregious is that there was a long-standing agreement and safeguard, which was discarded last Friday night. It is the same safeguard the Government will talk about when it comes to the Mercosur trade deal: "we have a safeguard lads, there is no need to worry." We saw how the safeguard was disregarded last Friday. The fear I have with the Mercosur trade deal is that the safeguard and backstop is no safeguard whatsoever. In fact, beef prices could fall by almost 50% over a five-year period and no handbrake would be pulled in relation to this.

6 o'clock

We must reject the deal. We cannot accept it. I ask the Minister of State to go back to the European Court of Justice and make sure that we get a fair deal for Irish fishermen in Irish waters.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I join colleagues in expressing my deep disappointment at the decision taken by a group of EU member states to block that deployment of the Hague preferences for higher proportional quotas. That decision has left Ireland uniquely exposed to nearly 70% loss in the allowable catch for mackerel in this country, a reduction that would have been mitigated by this long-standing and agreed protection mechanism for Ireland. Mackerel is Ireland's most valuable catch, worth €94 million in exports last year to premium European and Asian markets. This reduction in quota will slash that figure by a huge amount - €82 million plus in one year - with combined losses to the wider economy in terms of processing and other activities being considerably higher.

I know that catch limits have consistently exceeded levels recommended by conservationists and action has to be taken to replenish mackerel stocks in particular. However, it is not Irish coastal communities that have caused this devastating reduction. According to NAPA's figures recently, in one week alone in 2023, Norwegian vessels caught over 40,000 tonnes of mackerel. They caught over 40,000 tonnes of mackerel in one week alone. That single week's haul is worth more than Ireland's total allowable catch for all of 2025 and almost four times the recommended quota for 2026 under this deal. Very big numbers are being taken by other states. Ireland will undoubtedly be hit harder by these charges than these other states, yet it is Ireland that pays the price for their unsustainable fishing practices.

I know, as does the Minister of State, just how important fishing is for our coastal communities. The Minister of State visited Howth harbour, in my constituency, with me and he was welcome there. He is always welcome to come out. It demonstrates the role this sector plays in sustaining the vibrancy of small but well-defined coastal communities. Howth is one of six big fisheries, as the Minister of State knows. I thank him for his visit. He saw the thriving local economy, supported by the harbour. Everything that happens around the harbour, commercial businesses, the activity in the harbour itself, seafood restaurants and tourism, leisure and all the other activities, are supported by the harbour itself. Communities like Howth will need meaningful supports over the coming months to respond appropriately to these challenges.

I welcome the Minister of State's indication that he will bring a memo to Cabinet to start to try to address the fallout of this discussion while we continue to fight the case abroad. The significant support that we provide to farmers and to the agrifood sector must be replicated for fisheries. There is no choice. We have to do it. Fisheries are vital to the future of the country and to the communities that rely on them for their livelihood in so many different ways. Trust seems to have disintegrated between Ireland and the EU on fisheries policies. It looks like some of the larger member states have effectively prioritised their Mediterranean fleets and activities and failed to honour that protection mechanism that has been fundamental to the Atlantic-facing Irish fishing industry for so long. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are being pushed around by larger member states into accepting outcomes that favour larger fishing nations. The Minister of State has my full support and my colleagues' full support to continue to fight the cause on this issue for the communities that we represent. I encourage him again to bring that memo to Cabinet so we can support communities.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: As the Minister of State is well aware, our maritime territory is one of the largest in the EU. It is a vast resource ten times the size of our landmass. Given this scale, Ireland should be a leader in European fisheries. Our beef and dairy farmers have set the golden standard on the world stage. There is no reason our fishing industry should not be the same. Yet since the 1983 Common Fisheries Policy, our coastal communities have been relegated to second class status within the EU. We have seen preferential treatment granted to other member states. We have watched as third country vessels operate brazenly in our water, often overfishing with little to no consequences. Now, we face the latest betrayal, the threat of deeper quota cuts, combined by the blocking of the Hague preferences by our so-called EU partners. This is a mechanism designed to protect vulnerable nations like Ireland. This is not just a policy adjustment; it puts over 2,000 jobs in our coastal communities at immediate risk. The knock-on effect will cripple towns and villages already stretched to their limit by depopulation and economic neglect.

What is becoming clear is that Ireland's primary producers are under attack. We see it in the Mercosur deal - a threat to flood our markets with substandard beef, undermining our farmers and the standards of food on our shelves. We see it here in the calculated move to deny Ireland its fair share and its rightful protections. The spirit of mutual co-operation and respect upon which the EU was founded is being broken. It is time for this Government to move beyond polite requests and to take a firm stance.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: We can all agree that the decision to vote against Ireland on the Hague preferences by the so-called EU member states is a statement of intent. With a stroke of a pen, they have devastated the Irish fishing industry. Off the coast of my own County Wexford, Irish vessels are left with 28 tonnes of sole, while Belgium has 450 tonnes. In fact, in one week, the Norwegian fleet caught 40,000 tonnes of mackerel, the entire quota allowed for the Irish fleet. The trend goes on. Fishers are getting a raw and unjust deal. The facts are in black and white. Number one is the devastating quota cuts - 57,000 tonnes less in 2026, an estimated loss of €200 million a year, and the threat of a loss of 2,300 direct jobs. Number two is the Hague preferences were undermined. Number three is the monopolisation of the fishing industry by the so-called big five. The influence they wield in European Union circles is not questioned, yet they hold more sway than our own Government. Has the Minister or the Tánaiste questioned this or called for an investigation into these nefarious lobbying practices? Will the Minister seek legal advice and legally challenge the dismissal of the 49-year-old Hague preference agreement that protected and recognises Ireland's right to its territorial waters and the fish that is caught there as a natural resource belonging to the Irish people?

Surely there is a clear case of custom and practice here. Surely there is a case to bring this before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. The Irish fishers accept the scientific findings, but they are rightly infuriated by the inflated quotas given to countries that are not members of the EU, yet these countries benefit while our own Irish fleet are the ones paying the ultimate penalties for something they did not do. Fishers across the country, including my own maritime County Wexford, want to know what is plan B. Is there any plan B? What life supports are being put in place? What legal actions, if any, are being taken on the Hague preference agreement? Will there be an investigation on how the big five are able to influence EU policy?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about this very serious matter. When we talk about fishermen, we are talking about an awful lot of people. We are talking about coastal communities and people who depend on it so much to eke a living. It is often dangerous and contrary. People have gone through a lot to put the fleets that they have together. To think that in some room somewhere with a stroke of a pen that we can destroy up to 2,300 jobs in the fishing industry in our own country is one of the most serious things that has happened since I came to Dáil Éireann in 2016. I might be a small bit away from the sea, but I am not that far. I have known all my life people like Michael Orpen and all those people who did so much to employ people from Castletownbere all the way over along and down into Cahersiveen and back to Dingle. So many people have given so much to the industry and employed so many people. This is going to finish us altogether.

People were not happy with the fishing they had. It is about three years since I have seen a mackerel. We know for a long time that something has gone wrong and now this complicates it further. I am telling the Minister and Minister of State that we cannot accept this. They will have to pull out all the stops whatever it takes. It will not do to do it here. They have go into whatever room this is decided in and threaten them with everything. We have more miles of seashore in our little country. It was one of the biggest industries we had. It was actually the English who taught us how to fish back in the 1600s. We complained about them a lot over the years but this is one of the good things they did but we have let it go and that is not satisfactory in their eyes, my eyes or anyone's eyes. To think that there will be foreign vessels fishing off

our shores and fellas will be standing on the seashore looking out at them is not fair. I am asking the Minister and the Minister of State to ensure that they work together with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and all the Ministers to ensure that whatever veto they can use is used or whatever they can do is done because their fate and our fate will be decided if this is going to be the end result of it.

We have had the short straw since we joined the European Union but this is cause enough for me anyway to say that we will have to withdraw from a lot of their carry-on if we are going to lose our own fishing waters. Since we joined the EU, we have not had the benefit of them totally like we should have had. We saw a demonstration when we were in the convention centre during Covid. The fishing fleet came up the river and represented themselves so correctly and so properly. Nobody had the one story. The fishermen all had their own different stories and they were very interesting to listen to. Sadly, whatever has happened now has superseded all that for the worse. It is not good enough for people.

When fishermen are affected, many coastal communities are affected. Everyone was getting a bit out of it, including the shopkeeper, the publican, the garage, fitters and the small processors. This is going to be devastating. The one thing I was very proud of was seeing lorry after lorry coming from Castletownbere going up through our village in the dark of night and maybe going down again in the middle of the night. They seem to operate at night because the road is so bad, they can see the lights and it is safer for them to travel at night. We appreciate them for the work they have been doing diligently and without any error.

It is nothing that Ireland has done. We have not let Europe down but we are being taken to the cleaners. Christmas Day is coming. It will be here in less than a week but the Minister and the Minister of State cannot sit down during that time. They have to ensure they put a strategy in place to teach them a lesson that they cannot come into Irish waters. We own them. That is the starting point. They should only be let in if we let them in. They should be threatened with whatever bit of artillery we have because it is our property, our coastline, our jobs and our people who are being affected. It is time that we stood up and took no more of their bull because that is what they are giving us. They are giving us nothing and we are just begging for everything - begging for the derogation and begging for Mercosur. We are entitled to live as well as the Brazilians or anyone else that is interfering with our markets. They are interfering with our commodity here in fish that has been cleaned out and we just stand idly by. That cannot happen. I am asking the Minister and the Minister of State to work together to ensure that it does not happen.

I welcome the gentlemen in the Public Gallery. They are concerned and we are all concerned with them. We have to stand with them. We have to do something more drastic than what we are doing because we have not been good enough up to now. We were taken to the cleaners and I am asking the Government to put an end to it once and for all. This is more serious than any other thing that has happened in the past 15 or 20 years because we were bad enough up until then but now we have been cleaned out altogether. I am very upset about this. It is a very serious matter for people whose lives depend on it.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputies for their contributions and the Minister of State for his contribution earlier in the session, for being here for the entire debate and for his ongoing stellar work in what has been

a really difficult year. I also recognise also the presence of representatives of industry. I thank them for being in Brussels last week. It was good to meet with them over there. I also thank them also for their close collaboration. Their close work with the Minister of State has given us the best chance to work together as well as we can in what has been a really difficult time.

The range and the passion in the contributions speak to the importance this issue holds in our rural coastal communities. It is important to remember that Ireland has received 120,000 tonnes of quota to fish for 2026. This is a reduction from last year of valuable stocks such as mackerel and nephrops but we will ensure that this quota is managed carefully. The quota management advisory committee, which includes representatives of all sectors of the industry, the marine agencies and my Department, has already engaged on planning for 2026. While cognisant of the impact the reduction of quarter for important species will have on our fleet, we also need to be conscious of the potential impact of reduced quota on our inshore fleet. The reduction in quota from pelagic species like mackerel and blue whiting is unlikely to shift additional focus to non-quota stocks in the short term. However, it will have an impact on the price of bait. The sector reports that bait accounts for approximately 20% of inshore vessel expenses. The development of alternative sources of bait is vitally important in supporting the inshore sector's viability. BIM and ATU Galway are working on innovative solutions, including green crab-based bait blocks. Initial trials have shown promising results with further testing planned in 2026.

A common theme of the contributions has been the implication of Ireland's Hague preferences. We need to be clear as we were last week on what the Hague preferences are. To recap, the Hague preference system recognises Ireland's heavy dependency on the stocks in the waters around Ireland and the fact that we have relatively low quota entitlements to these stocks, particularly whitefish, under the Common Fisheries Policy. The system grants Ireland a larger share of certain stocks when the absolute amounts allocated via the relative stability share fall below a certain level. This was to mitigate the low residence stability share Ireland that was achieved by Ireland's underdeveloped sector based on the track record in the years immediately after accession in 1973 and considering the substantial additional waters available to the EEC-EU when Ireland expanded its exclusive economic zone from 1976 onwards. The Hague preferences are based on commitments made in annex 7 of the Council resolution on 3 November 1976 - the Hague resolution - to take account of the vital needs of communities that were especially dependent on fishing when allocating fishing quotas to each of the member states. This commitment was later quantified as specified minimum quantities of quota for certain fish stocks to be allocated to certain fisheries-dependent communities. The regions to which they applied were Ireland and northern parts of the UK. The Hague preferences are invoked during the annual TAC and quota process. They have to be agreed by member states of the December council and are often the subject of difficult negotiations.

Following the UK's withdrawal from the, EU Ireland is the only member state that benefits from these preferences. While the additional quota benefits Irish fishers, it must come from somewhere else. The countries affected by this were Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Germany and, to a modest extent, Poland. However, other than mackerel, it has a very low impact on Germany and Netherlands. There has been strong opposition from some member states to the principle of the Hague preferences. These member states argued that they were taken into account when allocation keys were first established in 1983.

With the Common Fisheries Policy framework regulation, the Hague preferences are recognised as forming part of relative stability in the allocation of fish stocks between member states. Ireland has consistently and successfully argued that relative stability has therefore to be applied when taking due account of prior Hague agreements. However, these were the subject of a European Court of Justice judgment in 1998, which convinced some member states the application of the Hague preferences takes place at the discretion of the Council rather than being an automatic legal entitlement for Ireland.

A key question both this afternoon and at the committee yesterday was what legal action Ireland will take in respect of the exclusion of Ireland's Hague preferences from the compromise text. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, was quite clear at the committee yesterday, and I echo his view, that legal advice will be sought on any and all further actions that may be possible. We will consider that advice carefully. However, the more important message from our fishing sector is that it wants fish. Fish must be managed sustainably as when a stock is depleted, it will stay that way unless we take actions to support its regrowth. The Minister of State has outlined the most recent development in relation to the total allowable catch of mackerel in the Atlantic. We will engage closely with the EU while it considers its position in light of the recent actions by Norway, the UK, Iceland and the Faroes.

Meanwhile, we must recognise that our fishing and seafood sector must be supported through this very difficult time. Having had a number of engagements with the sector over the past two weeks, both with An Taoiseach and before the Council in Brussels, I am clear that despite the resilience shown by the sector, a whole-of-government approach is required to support it through this particular challenge. Both I and the Minister of State have committed to engaging with colleagues across Government to assess what framework of supports may be available to the seafood sector, to explore options within the constraints of the EU and national Exchequer funding and relevant EU and national legislation, in particular, taking account of the constraints that can arise from EU state aid rules for the fisheries sector.

I have discussed at Cabinet the need to establish a working group under the auspices of our Food Vision 2030 strategy to advance this commitment. A key priority for the food vision-seafood group will be to ensure that a platform of economic, environmental and social sustainability supports is available to the fisheries and seafood processing sectors and their coastal communities. The new group will be chaired by an independent chair and will include representatives from the fishing organisations, aquaculture, seafood processing organisations, my Department and its agencies, and other relevant Departments and agencies. I, along with the Minister of State, will determine the terms of reference for the food vision-seafood group. We will appoint that independent chair and will request nominations for membership from relevant Departments and agencies. It is intended to hold the first meeting of the group in January 2026.

The programme for Government, *Securing Ireland's Future*, commits to securing a sustainable future for the fisheries sector, while supporting coastal communities that rely on this activity for their livelihood. Both I and the Minister of State will lead the charge on that work drawing on the support of all Government colleagues. We will work together across Government to deliver on this commitment.

Message from Seanad Éireann

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the National Training Fund (Amendment) Bill 2025 without amendment.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 6.23 p.m agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 7 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.23 p.m. and resumed at 7 p.m.

Appropriation Bill 2025: Committee and Remaining Stages

Section 1 agreed to.

SECTION 2

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 have been ruled out of order as they are in conflict with the principles of the Bill.

Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 not moved.

Question proposed: "That section 2 stand part of the Bill."

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I will speak to section 2. The point needs to be made, as I have done virtually every year, that there is no secret service and yet every year there is an Estimate set down for €2 million to be issued to a secret service that supposedly does not exist but I will come back to that. The sum of €2 million is not huge. The fact is that all of the other Estimates go before a committee. This Estimate now falls under the Minister for public expenditure. It used to be the Minister for Finance. Yet, none of the Ministers have any responsibility for the Estimate. When I have put down questions over the years, what has happened is that my questions have been ruled out of order on the basis that the Minister has no official responsibility to Dáil Éireann for this matter under Standing Order 44. One of them was to ask both the Ministers for Finance and public expenditure the funding allocated to Vote 15, which in the past was Vote 22. Since 2011 the money is returned to the Exchequer each year. They are simple things. Normally, under housekeeping rules, you have to account for the money spent. The last time I got any kind of substantial answer was when Brian Cowen held the position of Minister for Finance. He listed all of the amounts of funding given and the overrun. Nowadays, €2 million is spent and there is no accountability. He said in a reply to me in 2005 that the allocation for the secret service - Vote 12 - for the years in question was set out in a table and that it was not the practice to divulge information or explanations relating to expenditure on this Vote. I did a bit of digging and it has been practice in the past, just not recent practice, to divulge what this money is for.

In 2009, it was said that the purpose of the secret service Vote was to retain the information which was necessary for the security of this country and that given the sensitivity associated with a Vote of this nature, information relating to its operation is not made public. I am not looking for a breakdown but somebody has to be accountable. It is the same as An Garda Síochána, which has an Accounting Officer. There is no Accounting Officer here. Given that a new security committee was set up, I would have thought that this would have been one of

the areas that would have fallen to it, that it would have said the €2 million was agreed, that it would take the Minister at his word and that it was happy the €2 million was spent appropriately, or not. That would have been up to the members to discuss.

Gay Mitchell, when he was foreign affairs Minister, asked that the Irish secret service should be monitored by a committee of the Oireachtas. It is going back over the years. If you go back to 1922, that is when the funding started. In 1927, it was £6,700. It was not a huge sum but if you look at the figures and the account of that, Mr. Ernest Blythe stated that, "The purposes of the Secret Service Vote are the obtaining of information which is requisite for the security of the country and which cannot be obtained openly." That is exactly what has been said to me in recent years. He continued that:

The amounts are paid out on the order of the Minister for Finance at the request of another Minister. The Minister who is responsible for the requisition is required, at the end of the financial year, to give a certificate in the following form: [This does not happen now so far as I know.] "I hereby certify that the amount actually expended by me or under my direction for secret service in the year ended ----- was so much and that the balance in my hands on the 31st day of March was so much, and I further solemnly declare that the interests of the public service required that the payments should be made out of the Service Fund and that they were properly so made."

That is the form of certificate that used to be issued and was the exact same form issued by the British secret service since 1888 when its secret service was set up in London after the IRB attacked its offices. We still continue the British tradition. However, even in Westminster there is a security committee that MI5 and MI6 are responsible to and they are held accountable in terms of funding.

The amount in 1927 was £4,000 but the amount in 1922-1923 was £220,000. That is the figure that was voted and £118,000 was spent. We can guess what that was because that was the year in which the State was executing republicans as part of the Civil War. In 1923, the amount dropped to £50,000 and it continued to drop. In recent years, it has increased and in more recent years it has stayed at €2 million without going up or down in any shape or form.

The question is: when will this Vote be before the Dáil or a committee so that somebody has to give even a vague account and say what it is for rather than what is happening now where it is even more secretive than before?

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I know it is something he has raised on many other occasions in relation to the Appropriation Bill. In terms of the wider practice, it is a Vote listed under my Department and it is also a Vote that can be used by other Government Departments in the context of the fund during the particular year. It is the only Vote operated in which the Oireachtas has waived its right to know precisely what the money has been spent on. It has always been the custom and practice not to disclose what Departments sought funds from this particular Vote. The appropriation account for the secret service, as has been said in previous years, is also audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Oireachtas votes a specific sum annually for this Vote and the Comptroller and Auditor General plays an important role with the Secretary General in terms of the overall financial control of it. There is obviously practice around why that is the case.

If an Oireachtas committee wants to have an informed debate about the Vote in terms of future practice or tradition, that is obviously something the Department can have engagement on as part of the overall Appropriation Bill. We are simply seeking to continue what has been advanced in previous years. The fact that the C and AG plays an auditing role is also important in that context.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I would welcome the debate because it is the only Vote that is specific and set apart. It does not fall under the Garda Síochána Vote, the Defence Forces Vote, as you would presume, or even the Minister for justice's Vote. It falls specifically under finance or, of late, public expenditure, which begs the question as to who stands over this expenditure. It has not increased in recent years. It is €2 million. As I said, in the bigger scheme of things, it is not a huge amount of money.

If the Minister came in here next year and increased it fivefold, there would still be no accountability for that other than at the Cabinet. Somebody would have to go to the Cabinet and explain or just say, "Sorry, hard luck, it is common not to ask questions about this", and that would be it. That is what is being asked of us here.

In the past, we did not have a security committee. When the committee was being set up in this Dáil term, the idea most people had was it would look at issues such as internal and external threats to the State, as security committees elsewhere do. In the past, it was also said this allocation was money for informers. If that was the case, it would sit with An Garda Síochána, which would have to account for and manage it. It was said it was money to obtain information, but it does not define it beyond that. I am not going to labour this point much longer, but debates in the past looked at whether it was appropriate to have a fund in times when there was no longer an emergency. There might be some logic to having one in the middle of the Civil War, from the Free State and Cumann na nGaedheal point of view, but there did not seem to be a logic to it in the years thereafter. However, those who gave out about this fund in the early 1920s embraced it thereafter, even though questions have been asked by Members on different sides of the House.

I am not opposed to this Vote. The issue I have is with the accountability end of it. If the Minister is willing, he should schedule a debate on it in committee and I will do the same. I will ask my party's representative on the Committee of Public Accounts or the public expenditure committee about this. The Minister said the Comptroller and Auditor General audits this Vote, but it does not jump out in any of the C and AG's reports. He might audit it but it is not ever accounted for and his reports go through every other detail with a fine-tooth comb. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General is unable to print any information regarding this expenditure. We have had issues before the public accounts committee involving hundreds of thousands of euro, whereas this Vote amounts to €2 million every year. There is no outrun, which used to be the case in the past, there is no return of funding and there is no demand for a Revised Estimate in the middle of the year. How come, very conveniently every year, €2 million is asked for and spent?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh. My understanding is that when auditing the secret service Vote, the Comptroller and Auditor General does not examine it in detail or comment on it for the Oireachtas. Instead, his office departs from the usual certification regarding the correctness of accounts and simply certifies that the amount shown

in the account is supported by respective certification by the responsible Ministers. That is accepted as part of the wider discharging of responsibilities. The statement of internal financial control is signed by the Secretary General in my Department, who is the Accounting Officer for this particular Vote. That reflects the process and practice that have existed for a long time.

As I said, my Department has a very confined role in relation to the expenditure of the Vote. It extends only as far as agreeing to the annual Estimate and then the respective spending authorities certify and ensure it is processed in line with established procedures. That is the backdrop. There is obviously wider custom of practice as regards why this is the case. It is for any Oireachtas committee to question or probe that, and I respect that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Usually, committees do not deal with Votes unless they are specifically in the remit-----

Deputy Jack Chambers: The wider structure of the Vote is still a matter-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: When committees are formed, they are specifically informed of what Vote they are responsible for. This Vote does not appear in any of the committees' remits. That is the problem. The Minister or whoever else can say the Minister has no responsibility to the Dáil on this matter, and that is correct, but Ministers also have no responsibility to any committee on this matter and, technically, no committee can take on this issue because it is one of those strange ones. In some ways, it has to go to Cabinet or somebody else has to raise the flag about it. It is a minor issue if we need to have a fund, slush fund or whatever else to assist. The security of the State is not dependent on €2 million, so it is in some ways meaningless if that is what it is. I will leave it at that but I hope I will not be arguing with the Minister in the last days before Christmas next year. However, I will continue to do this until, at some stage, some oversight is had beyond a Minister nodding to the Comptroller and Auditor General saying, "Everything is fine, don't worry about it. I have no receipts but that is the way it is."

Question put and agreed to.

Sections 3 and 4 agreed to.

SECTION 5

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 4, line 26, after "cited" to insert "as *Acht Leithghabhála* 2025 or, in the English language,".

Only this week, we had President Catherine Connolly launch a multilingual dictionary. It was a fantastic day. We now have a groundbreaking new dictionary that is accessible online. When the Minister was the Minister with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, he part-funded the research into this through Foras na Gaeilge. I do not think anybody is critical of that but when you look up the meaning of "leithreas" in the dictionary online, through *foclóir.ie*, it states:

1. Babhla mór a bhfuil suíochán air a bhfuil poll ann, a bhíonn nasctha le córas uisce. Úsáideann tú an leithreas nuair a bhíonn do mhún nó do chac le déanamh agat.

2. Seomra ar leith i dteach nó i bhfoirgneamh, nó both beag ar leith i suíomh oscailte, ar féidir le daoine dul chuig an leithreas ann

Sin na mínithe ar leithreas. Má lorgaíonn tú an focal "leithreasa", ní ann dó, ach tá leithreasú, leithghabháil agus leithreas - "funds set aside" nó "leithreasaí buiséid". The point I made before was that, in some ways, people say it is a piss-take but it is not. It is not in common parlance. Part of producing a dictionary is trying to ensure the words being used are being used correctly. That is why I have said, not just in this amendment but in the past, that it should be the "Acht Leithghabhála 2025". In the past, when I raised this, it has been said that this is the tradition and we will keep using the words, but words go out of fashion. We have done it with other words that were common at one stage, such as the Aliens Act. We do not call people aliens anymore. If it has been pointed out that this is not a word in common parlance or is no longer used, we should change it. To do so would not take away from the Bill. We need to change the Title to something that is more accessible and also does not give a double meaning.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am informed "Acht Leithghabhála" is not the correct citation in Irish for the Bill. What has been used since 1923, which is the Short Title of the Bill, is the correct one.

More generally, I defer to the Deputy's interest and knowledge of the language. When I was Minister for the Gaeltacht, he showed a interest in and passion for it, and I respect that. We obviously have a thread here, whereby this has been in consistent use for 100 years. I am told the Deputy proposed a similar amendment in 2023 and the Department engaged at the time with the Department with responsibility for the Gaeltacht on what was deemed to be the correct Title.

The position I have been told, as of today is what we have said is the correct translation. I am not against having a broader engagement with the Deputy or others outside of here and with the Department of the Gaeltacht as well. If it is correct that it should be updated for the future I would be very open to that. Language evolves, as do Titles to legislation. For today, that is the position I have been given but it is something I would be happy to engage on in the context of future legislation. I respect the fact that the Deputy is more knowledgeable about it than I am. This has been checked in the past and is something that we are respectfully continuing this year. In the context of what the Deputy has said and given the ongoing work with Foras na Gaeilge, the new Uachtarán and within the language community, the Government should always be open to that engagement and taking an informed view with further inputs and I would be open to that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: That would be a useful engagement in terms of parliamentary language. There has been a campaign over the years called plain English. We should have the same for Irish, where we make our legislation as accessible to the public as possible. Where there are words that have double meanings we should put in a different word. That has implications obviously in law. We have to make sure that the word can stand up and that we specify in legislation what it was previously known as and so on. In the future especially, we will be able to address issues like that because everything will be available on computer. The line between this year's and next year's legislation will be a lot easier than pulling down different bits off the shelf. Maybe in the future that can be looked at but it not just this legislation as there is a load of legislation where words, which are not in common practice -

they might be correct - make it difficult for people to understand our legislation in Irish or in English. The legislation is sometimes gobbledygook and it is even more gobbledygook if a Title is put on it that can be totally misconstrued. In this case, I believe that is one of those. The vast majority of Irish speakers would not have a clue what it meant other than presuming that it is a toilet Bill. It is not and we know that. We know what we are discussing. It would be good if that can be taken on board when people are looking at miscellaneous provisions Bills and stuff like that. Often that is where we can correct mistakes that have been there over years or where people have identified problems.

If we started using the Title 100 years ago, that does not mean that it was necessarily correct. One hundred years ago, there was a big debate about whether the Free State would be termed "Saorstát" or whether a republic was a saorstát. There was a big debate about the Titles because they were not common parlance. The words used for our parliamentary procedures all came from Westminster or a coiste téarmaíochta was set up to identify words that may have been used in the past, a couple of hundred years before that, and which might relate to those. They might not necessarily ever have been used in the form they are now being used in, but they were appropriated at the time. This is no different than most people using "carr", rather than "gluaisteán" in Irish, for car. The word the coiste téarmaíochta came up with was gluaisteán but most people do not use that. The question is how should we reflect that in law.

I will not delay any further on this. I will withdraw the amendment, based on the fact that we will try to have a discussion about this in terms of terminology and legislation.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Section 5 agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Amendment No. 4 in the name of Deputy Ó Snodaigh has been ruled out of order as it is in conflict with the principles of the Bill.

Amendment No. 4 not moved.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported without amendment, received for final consideration and passed.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): The Bill, which is certified to be a Money Bill in accordance with Article 22.2.1° of the Constitution, will be sent to the Seanad.

Credit Review Bill 2024: Report and Final Stages

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): As there are no amendments tabled for Report Stage we now proceed to Fifth Stage.

Bill received for final consideration.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Sinn Féin is not opposing this legislation. I know the Minister is stepping in for Deputy Troy. I want to express my condolences to Deputy Troy and his family on the passing of his father. Our thoughts are with him at this difficult time.

I want to say two things in relation to this legislation. We facilitated the quick passage of this legislation. We support the Credit Review Office. We have signposted many of our constituents to go to the office. I have tabled amendments to have a wider discussion in relation to its functions and to the fact that many businesses are not able to get credit now. They are relying on non-bank lenders. There are serious questions in relation to people having to turn to the shadow bank sector.

However, the reason we were asked to bring this legislation in quickly is that this was set up through the NAMA legislation, and we were told NAMA had to be dissolved by the end of the year. As the Minister of State knows, NAMA was supposed to be dissolved under an agreement with the European Union in 2021. There was a review carried out prior to that. An extension was given very explicitly on the following basis:

NAMA commits to disposing [of] its residual residential loans before the end of December 2025 and it is intended that NAMA will be dissolved by that date subject to outstanding litigation.

We had the heads of Bill in the finance committee a year and a half ago. This has been on the priority list of every Government since - in every session - but we have not heard a dicky bird about this legislation, so I really question what is happening here. We have a CEO of an organisation that does not even exist, a CEO who was supposed to go to a makey-up job for the €430,000 he was on, but that had to be withdrawn when the public focused on it. There are serious questions about this. The legislation was being fast-tracked and accommodated. We were happy to accommodate it, and I made the argument that this had to be done before the end of the year, but it now appears it did not have to be done before the end of the year. Is there an agreement with the Commission to extend the NAMA legislation? If so, until when? The Minister of State may not hold the relevant note at this point. I know he is stepping in for the Minister, but I would appreciate if a note could be sent to me if the relevant information is not available to him.

I am happy to support the legislation as drafted.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I appreciate the Deputy's understanding of the situation in relation to the Minister of State, Deputy Troy. My understanding is that the Commission is aware that the Government intends to move ahead with the dissolution of NAMA in 2026 and that there has been a discussion in that regard. I will ask the officials to prepare a more comprehensive response that addresses Deputy Doherty's question. I thank him for facilitating the early passage of this legislation. He and I are well aware through our work in our constituencies of the importance of such an office and the benefit that accrues from it to our constituents.

I thank all the Deputies for their contributions to the debates on the Bill as it has proceeded through the House. The work that the Credit Review office has done since it was established in 2010 has given valuable assistance to viable SMEs and farm businesses in obtaining bank credit. Placing the office on a firm statutory basis recognises that value and endorses the Credit Review service as a permanent feature of the SME credit landscape in Ireland. We all know that from time to time there are different fluctuations in markets and different issues that arise. We have seen that Covid, the war in Ukraine and other national and international events that take place can have short- and medium-term impacts on small and medium-sized enterprises and can affect their potential credit rating. Therefore, it is important that this office would have a solid footing.

The credit reviewers' recommendations have resulted, so far, in banks agreeing to make €86 million in credit available to SMEs and farm businesses. Between the actual reviews conducted and the advice given directly via its helpline, or more generally through its useful publications or advocacy work, Credit Review has provided a valuable service to thousands of Irish SMEs. More importantly, it has contributed to an improved culture in the banking sector in the period since the financial crash, where there is an expectation that banks will treat their customers better and with due regard to the best interests of those customers, including SME customers. Borrowers can apply to Credit Review not only if they are refused a new loan but also if an existing loan facility is withdrawn or reduced. I am conscious, as I said, of some of the national and international issues that can arise. Earlier, Deputy Doherty and I were here discussing the impact on the fishing community and some of the small to medium-sized enterprises involved and talking about their need for credit to get them through a difficult time, so yet again we see the importance of such an office.

While the Bill is, in one sense, merely a technical exercise in providing a legal basis for the continuance of the *status quo*, it is also a declaration of the Government's expectation that borrowers be treated fairly and with high standards of professionalism.

The Bill provides for an expanded role for Credit Review in the future should the evolution of the SME credit market justify that. This underlines the Government's ongoing commitment to support the growth and development of the SME sector.

Section 2 provides the Minister with the power to extend the scope of the Credit Review service to other classes of regulated non-bank lenders, should that be required in the future. Before exercising that power, the Minister would need to be satisfied that such a change was justified in light of developments in the SME credit market. In that context, the Minister will continually monitor developments in the SME credit market in order to assess whether the exercise of that power would be appropriate. In deciding to extend the scope of the service, the Minister must have regard to the extent to which demand by borrowers for credit is being met by regulated financial service providers, the importance to borrowers and the economy of the State of particular types of credit provided by the class of lenders concerned, and the amount of credit provided by that class of lenders.

For a variety of reasons, increasing numbers of SME borrowers are availing of credit facilities provided by various non-bank lenders. Some SMEs choose to borrow from non-bank lenders because those lenders are offering specialist products that more closely match the particular needs of a given business. For example, a significant amount of non-bank lending to SMEs is provided by specialist property lenders and asset finance providers. Other non-

bank lenders specialise in leasing and invoice discounting. In some cases, non-bank lenders may provide faster decision-making and better customer service but this service may be priced differently. They may also have a higher risk appetite than the banks and may, as a result, be willing to lend to SMEs that might otherwise struggle to obtain credit.

The overall effect of the presence of non-bank lenders in the market is to provide greater competition in the market for SME credit, and more options for SME borrowers to access more diverse sources of financing apart from traditional bank-provided credit. This will help businesses to grow and thrive, driving increased investment, innovation and productivity without excessive dependence on the banking sector for finance. The Department of Finance will continue to monitor developments in this area and, should further change be necessary, appropriate legislative provision can be considered in the future.

While there has been a decline in net bank lending to SMEs in recent years, the evidence, including the Department of Finance's annual credit demand survey, indicates that this is due to muted demand rather than a lack of supply. In other words, viable SMEs that are seeking bank credit are, in the great majority of cases, successful. If there are SMEs whose applications for bank credit are refused, or whose existing credit facilities are withdrawn or reduced, I strongly urge those SMEs to approach the Credit Review service for assistance, which I have no doubt they will find helpful.

The Central Bank's SME regulations also provide protections for SMEs when they are either applying for or have credit facilities from regulated financial service providers, giving SME borrowers transparency around the application process. Under the SME regulations, lenders must offer borrowers the option of a meeting, which includes a credit review, at least once a year. Lenders must also provide borrowers with specific written reasons for refusing or withdrawing credit. The SME regulations also include various protections for SME customers who are in arrears or may be at risk of going into arrears. Under the regulations lenders must have an internal appeals procedure in order that borrowers can appeal a decision in relation to a credit decision. Furthermore, the general principles of the consumer protection code apply in respect of all customers, and the definition of consumer includes small businesses with annual turnover of less than €3 million, rising to €5 million from next March. The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman is also available to assist borrowers who believe they have been mistreated by a regulated financial service provider.

The existing Credit Review office has been operating quite effectively on its current legal basis. It is timely to bring this Bill forward now due to the fact that the NAMA legislation is due to be repealed. The work of the Credit Review office has not been inhibited in any way by the fact that the Bill is being enacted now rather than earlier. This has allowed other work to be undertaken that is more time sensitive.

I thank the officials and TDs in this House for their co-operation this evening. The Bill places the Credit Review service on a firm statutory footing in order that it can continue to provide a valuable service to SMEs across Ireland. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): The Bill will now be sent to the Seanad.

Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages

Deputy Mark Ward: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 13, between lines 29 and 30, to insert the following:

“(c) the insertion of the following subsection after subsection (5):

“(5A) In carrying out the powers conferred by subsection (5), the Minister shall—

(a) ensure that a review of the financial supports to disadvantaged communities, identified in the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, that are affected by crime, is conducted in public consultation with individuals and stakeholders,

(b) ensure that such a review is undertaken every 24 months at a minimum, or more frequently, at the discretion of the Minister, and a report on the review is laid before each House of the Oireachtas,

(c) ensure that the report laid before each House of the Oireachtas identifies any additional financial supports, other than that provided in the annual budget, that may be provided to disadvantaged communities as in paragraph (a) affected by crime in order to alleviate the impact of crime and prevent future criminal behaviour, including the funding of targeted youth educational and development initiatives where appropriate,

(d) give due consideration to the recommendations of any review carried out under this subsection and prioritise, where possible, the use of monies realised in the making of disposal orders under this section for the purposes identified in the review, and (e) ensure that a report on the use of monies realised in the making of disposal orders under this Act is laid before each House of the Oireachtas on an annual basis.”,”.

Sinn Féin supports the overall aims of this Bill. Anything that reduces the amount of time it takes for the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, to take money and assets from organised criminals is welcome. It is something that should probably have been done long ago.

For this amendment, I went back to recommendation 15 of the report of the justice committee on the issue, which stated: "The Committee recommends further examination of the use of funds recovered from proceeds of crime and how such funds could be invested ... through the provision of preventative supports within communities." It is those preventative supports that I am aiming at.

Sinn Féin has long advocated that the money taken by CAB should be reinvested in the communities that are most hit and affected by crime. In fact, my colleague, Deputy Ó Snodaigh, first raised this matter in the Dáil 15 years ago. I and Deputy Ó Murchú had a Bill in 2021, the contents of which were the same as this amendment. That Bill passed Second Stage. We are looking to see that the money taken by CAB is put into the most disadvantaged communities.

It has been long proven that disadvantaged communities are more vulnerable to crime and drug use. There is a direct link between poverty, crime and addiction. One of the ways that

we can determine a disadvantaged area or an extremely disadvantaged area is through the Pobal deprivation index. The latest deprivation index was published in 2023 and stated that despite nationwide improvements in deprivation measures, the gaps between Ireland's most disadvantaged areas and the national average have increased. There are almost 200,000 people now living in areas that are classed as very or extremely disadvantaged. I would like to see the money recovered by CAB redirected into those communities.

As I said, the most recent Pobal deprivation index was published in 2023. The previous one was published in 2016. In those seven years, there were notable changes for the worse in some of the areas that I represent. North Clondalkin, for example, is an area of disadvantage. I do not need the Pobal index to tell me that because it is the area in which I grew up. It is a great place, and it was a great place to grow up, but it was also a tough place to grow up. We have had great community spirit over the years despite the problems we experience on a daily basis. There was a lack of amenities and infrastructure. There was a lack of employment opportunities. When I would go for a job as a young person, I would have to give the address of a relative who did not live in the area so I might have a chance of an interview, such was the stigma of living in the area. There is a history of early school leaving, youth crime and organised crime in our area. Addiction is rife throughout.

In 2016, when the deprivation index was published - I have the map in my hand and can give it to the Minister - only one estate in north Clondalkin was designated "extremely disadvantaged". Fast forward from 2016 to 2023 and six more housing estates were added to that designation. Things have got worse over the years. In fact, things are regressing. The whole area, bar one estate, is either very or extremely disadvantaged. It is areas such as those that need to be targeted by the community safety fund.

We welcome the community safety fund, as I said. We have advocated for it for a long time. We want to ensure that it goes to the areas that need it the most. For the very first roll-out of the community safety fund, six front-line organisations in my area, which are dedicated to tackling crime, drug use and poverty, applied to the fund but not one of them was successful. I looked at the 42 successful applications in the most recent round of applications to the community safety fund and I must say there are some really worthy organisations included. I will not stand up here and say that the organisations that got funding did not deserve it. However, I will give one example of an organisation that got funding. I noticed that €142,000 from the community safety fund went to the FAI. I have been involved in soccer clubs in my area for years. In all my years working and organising in a disadvantaged area, and volunteering as a soccer coach and manager, I have never seen the FAI give us any support whatsoever. In clubs such as Collinstown Football Club, girls and boys are getting changed on the side of the pitch because they have no dressing rooms. There is not one Astroturf pitch in the whole of north Clondalkin. This week, we have heard that the FAI is cutting its measly contribution of €10,000 per player development programme with the education and training board, ETB. That funding is being cut, which will have an impact right across disadvantaged areas. A little known fact is that Roy Keane was one of the first people to go through the ETB in Collinstown school in Dublin, believe it or not, even though he is from Cork. Other players who went through that programme include Abbie Larkin from Ringsend and Pico Lopes, who is going over to represent his country,-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Cape Verde.

Deputy Mark Ward: -----Cape Verde, in the World Cup. This is where I have a problem.

The other problem I have with the likes of the FAI getting that funding is that it has a lot more capacity and manpower to be able to fill out the form to enable it to get the funding. I am on the boards of a number of front-line community organisations and we just do not have the capacity to fill out cumbersome forms.

I expect that the Minister will not accept this amendment. I will ask him, if possible, to consider how we can help front-line community organisations to apply for this fund more easily. Perhaps we can give them some resources or direction in that regard and make the process less cumbersome. We want the money that is being taken by CAB going back into the areas that need it the most. There is some poetic justice involved. A mother might have to go out to the credit union to get a loan so she can pay off a drug debt run up by one of her children who is caught up in addiction. When the money that mother paid is taken back from the criminal, and it will be taken from that criminal at some stage, we must ensure that it goes back into the areas that need it the most.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Like my colleague, I am fully supporting this amendment to the Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill. The amendment will make it more likely that the proceeds of crime are repurposed in the communities that are most impacted by crime. When I spoke on this Bill in July, I noted that any efforts that would deny criminals their gain from criminality are to be welcomed and that remains my firm position. It must be made obvious to anybody engaging in criminal activity that for those who profit, any gains will be fleeting and will be confiscated and returned, we hope, to the communities that have suffered and been damaged by criminality. There are many such communities in my home city of Limerick.

The aim of Deputy Ward's amendment is positive as it seeks to ensure that the seized proceeds of crime are reintroduced into the communities that have been most impacted by these criminals. CAB has done a good job in identifying and recouping some of the proceeds of crime. The community safety fund, which I have spoken about previously, is extremely positive and does redirect money to the communities. However, I would say that, to date, not enough of that money has been redirected to those communities most impacted. That must change.

In my home city of Limerick, we have some of the most deprived areas of the State. It is in conditions of deprivation that organised crime flourishes. It is in places where some people feel despondent that drug addiction becomes most prevalent. Vicious and heartless criminals take advantage and peddle their drugs to some of the most vulnerable in our communities. I understand why they do: the profits are huge.

In Limerick, we have several criminal feuds bubbling in the background. Some relate to old family arguments but most pertain to the division of territory and the maximising of illegal profits from drugs, including crack cocaine. Those feuds have led to several violent attacks on property and persons. As I have said many times previously, it is a miracle that nobody has as yet lost their lives in these attacks.

The communities most impacted by crime are great communities. I come from one myself. Some of the most wonderful and caring people reside in those areas. Criminal elements and those who seek to illegally gain profit do great damage to these communities. In an effort to exercise control, these criminals seek to destroy all that is good. A children's playground has become a no-go area for kids because one criminalgang has destroyed it and intimidates anybody else who tries to use it. Kids who want to do well in school, play sports and live normal lives are being taunted by the wealth of these often young criminals. These criminals drive around in nice cars, expensive trainers and top-brand clothes. They are often from families who do not work and never have. That sends the message that crime pays.

That is a message we must always fight back against. The seizure of illegally gained assets, the seizure of properties purchased through criminal profits, is the most visible way of showing that this so-called success is only fleeting. This is a welcome amendment and I hope the Minister will accept it. It should ensure that assets such as houses can be returned to the communities that have been impacted by crime.

On the Bill more generally, I am particularly hopeful that the provision to restrict and freeze the financial accounts and immovable assets in a timelier manner will limit the ability of suspected criminals to use these assets. It is satisfying to see the wealth returned to the communities through the community safety fund, and this amendment should assist in returning the wealth to the communities that the criminals originally took it from.

Limerick and other areas face a significant challenge with crime, yet at the same time we have fantastic local community projects across the city that do some great work with limited resources. The Bedford Row Family Project does incredible work trying to break the cycle of imprisonment and crime. It could do with much more funding and increased resources through the community safety fund. I am not a member of the justice committee but I was with its members on Monday when we were able to visit Limerick Prison. The governor and other officials in the prison told us of the massive work the Bedford Row project did in making sure people did not reoffend. It is money well spent.

The community safety fund for 2025 was positive for a number of organisations in Limerick, including the Moyross community centre, which got €150,000; and Our Lady of Lourdes Community Service Group, which got €135,877. These are two areas in what was called the Limerick regeneration area, which has come to a shuddering end and left many communities vulnerable without funding, as I have raised here before. Bizarrely, applications from the King's Island area were refused. It includes the St. Mary's Park area in the core of the city centre, the most disadvantaged small area in the whole State according to the Pobal deprivation index. As my colleague Deputy Mark Ward said earlier, some of our communities that we are doing our best to represent do not have the capacity to fill in the forms like other people do. Even if he is not accepting the amendment, I urge the Minister to look at the Pobal deprivation index and to consider measures whereby areas like St. Mary's Park are encouraged and helped to do the application, not to put in an application that often is not accepted.

I very much welcome today's debate and the aims of the legislation. This cannot happen in isolation. We must reinvest in these communities. The State must engage with them so that we can limit the allure of a criminal lifestyle that, unfortunately, prevails in some of them.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I support Deputy Mark Ward's amendment. He has already spoken about the legislation we proposed earlier. It is about ensuring that, for those communities that pay the greatest price for organised crime and all the chaos that comes with it, there is some sort of payback. We know none of that is going to be enough. What is needed is something far more comprehensive. I have spoken to the Minister about this. We constantly talk about early interventions, whole-of-government responses and interagency work. We really need to bring those about. We know those areas that are most disadvantaged. It is very simple to get the information from the Pobal index. All of this information is freely to hand in respect of those who suffer from the greatest levels of poverty and disadvantage. We have all known for a considerable time that they are the areas that suffer from what has been a scourge, particularly in relation to drugs and drug gangs. We have all seen the bad examples in estates that have remained for far too long. Like many others, I have said it is not just about a policing solution. I get that does not work. There is a need for it but we have seen the war on drugs fail in America and here. We need something better holistically. We have to look after those who are suffering under addiction. We have insufficient addiction services and do not have the supports that are necessary when we want to bring people away from that life.

There has been a failure to have a conversation not only about how we deal with organised crime and the deprivation that feeds it, but also the chaos that has been caused and how we give supports to families and communities. Beyond that, we must build a better society and a community that facilitate everyone. We can literally make this a better place. I was in the drugs committee lately. The experts know what to do and have always known the supports and projects that work and the pilots that failed to be expanded, but we have not done that. A massive increase in those elements of support could see us needing a lot less down the road.

I think that is it. This is almost the single transferable speech that everybody has. At the children's committee, the drugs committee and even the disability committee to some degree, it is all about early intervention and putting in those supports. At the children's committee recently, we had the area-based childhood, ABC, programme, Archways, The House in Cox's Demesne from my own constituency, Northside Partnership and even the ISPCC. They all spoke about the number of referrals seeking supports that were coming directly from Tusla. We had Ms Kate Duggan from Tusla before the committee on a different occasion. We all know there are issues around child protection. There are many issues we want to see resolved as well as a framework for protecting the most vulnerable. We also know that, given the need that is out there, the bodies in question and the community voluntary sector they deal with do not have the resources to address this. It involves interagency work. That is all that Tusla, the local authorities and the Garda will talk about. I will welcome it on some level when the community safety partnerships are eventually up and running. I am not sure they are the entire answer or that we have the suite of resources required.

We need to be able to deal with the outright criminality and bad examples that kids see. We have to have a conversation about identifying what supports and early interventions are needed. We have seen it work with the likes of the Greentown Project. People who have worked in those sorts of project are aware that they are sometimes dealing with the fourth generation in families, so there is an element of failure. That is not to take away from the good work they have done or the harm reduction. How bad would it be if those projects did not exist?

We have not got real about the issues. Included in that is drug debt intimidation, where the mother, father, granny or granddad gets the call and somebody has to cash in a pension, if they are lucky enough to have one, or go to the credit union. Once that tap is open, the drug dealer will be back to it again. We need to be able to shut these people down. The communities generally welcome it when they see action taken. I have welcomed the change of rules about being able to go after criminals for smaller amounts but it is not enough. We need to deal with that. We need to make sure the supports are there and that we do what we can for those who are being groomed by criminal gangs. The legislation we see in this House must be put out in the world and enforced in respect of those who bring young people into criminal gangs and force them to do things, bringing them into a world that only brings negativity. We must put in place whatever supports are necessary to prevent that. We have all seen youth diversion projects that do spectacular work. I have seen it in my own constituency. They have worked a hell of a lot better since the interventions have been happening at an earlier stage. We need to see more of that. That is a more comprehensive conversation. It is about us getting down to the issues in respect of criminality and supports. The local authorities, Tusla and the Garda will put their hands up and say they do not have the tools or powers to deal with the issues that exist at this point.

What Deputy Ward has proposed is a means of ensuring we can take back what has been taken by criminals who have put their foot on the neck of our communities for far too long. We must put the money and resources back into those communities and provide resilience. We are talking about very good, very strong communities.

8 o'clock

It can be a lot better, and we would all benefit from that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): We are coming to the end of the debate and have less than ten minutes left as per the schedule of business. Is it agreed to bring in the Minister to respond?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I would like to contribute on the amendment.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): We are time limited. Is it agreed that I bring in the Minister to respond?

Deputy Thomas Gould: How many Members are looking to speak? We could divide it.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will reply quickly. They can come in.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): I will give two minutes each and we will get it done. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister knows my area and knows the need. We also have to address ridiculous situations such as that of the drug ship berthed in Cork which has cost us €12 million to date. That is €12 million that could be spent on those areas as well as CAB money and other investments. It is stupid that we are spending money where we do not

need to spend it. The answer from the Revenue chair to the Public Accounts Committee was that he would do it all over again if they were in the same boat. We have to find ways to ensure that where there are ships caught in this way that we offload and get them out of our hands quickly in whatever way in order that it is not a drain on our funding and the money goes into the areas that it is needed. It is not needed in berthing fees, staffing fees and maintenance of a ship that we do not even own.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I support this amendment. Deputy Ward has tabled an important amendment. I ask the Minister to take it on board. If he does not take it on board now, I ask him to incorporate it when he is looking at this legislation and other legislation. What we have now is that the money made on the back of some of the communities that are most affected by drug dealing and criminality is not going back into those communities. That is just not right. We and the Minister know from the Pobal index where these communities are, where the communities who need the help are and where this money should go. I would love to see the Minister encourage CAB and give it the resources to go after more of these drug gangs, suppliers, dealers and criminals. They are destroying communities, families and individuals. CAB might get to them in the end, but we should be getting to them a lot sooner. There are drug dealing families in Cork who have been dealing drugs for nearly 40 years. How can a family be dealing drugs for 40 years and allowed to get away with it? CAB has tackled some of them but there should be a no-nonsense approach to these criminals because of the damage they are doing.

There are people in my community who have died by suicide because of the pressure that was put on them and their families as a result of drug debts. That is as good as murder. They drove them to suicide. They need to be tackled head-on. This amendment goes to supporting communities that need it the most. I will give the Minister examples. Golden Gloves Boxing Club has all-Ireland champions and European champions. It is renting a unit at the moment. That will be gone this year. There are 70, 80 or 100 children in the hall of Mayfield Boxing Club. It has no facilities of its own. Elite Boxing Club has no facilities of its own. It is renting again. That money should be going to them. Councillor Michelle Gould put in a motion relating to Knocknaheeny. Why is there no playground in Knocknaheeny? It is one of the most disadvantaged areas. Does the Minister know why? Cork City Council would not replace it because it kept getting damaged. Does the Minister think that it is right that people in Knocknaheeny have no playground because criminals are getting away with it?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I was following the debate in my office. I see this as a good amendment. I do not know if it is going to be accepted tonight or whether it can be factored in at a later stage. I join with what other speakers have said. There was a time when we were a more innocent country. People would set off on holidays and put the VCR under the pillowcase, pull the curtains and hope that no one would break into their house. How murky things have become since then, with drug dealing and the crime that goes hand-in-hand with it now having permeated everywhere. I have listened to a lot of the urban Deputies. There are urban parts of my county, but the problem has gone to every rural village as well.

I recently asked some parliamentary questions about the Criminal Assets Bureau. It is doing fantastic work. There was a term I heard some years ago at a joint policing committee. People were pushing for what is called "mini CAB". In every single village and housing estate, there

is some boyo with a fancy car in the driveway. He will have two or three holidays and watches like we have never seen before on his wrists. He is living a life over and beyond what anyone around him could afford. It is two fingers to the law; it is two fingers to his neighbours. People call to his house night after night, and they are not buying popcorn. We all know what is going on. It is happening in every single village. Our gardaí do a fine job, but they are not resourced enough to do all of this. In response, I got an interesting answer. It was a positive one. The Minister told me that there are now 620 gardaí trained up as divisional asset profilers. Beyond doing day-to-day policing and driving through communities, they are spotting these people living way beyond their means and report it to the Criminal Assets Bureau. The budget for CAB has gone up. The number of gardaí doing this has gone up. We need to move beyond the Kinahan-Hutch level crime we see on the front page of the *Sunday World*. In every community, there is an absolute scumbag tearing the heart of that community apart. As other Deputies have said, they are driving people to the point that they have to take their lives rather than having their life taken from them by somebody else. We need to add an additional layer of taking down these crime families who are in every single community. I do not know whether it will be accepted tonight, but what we are all speaking about here needs to become embodied in justice policy. I congratulate the Minister on his work to date. He has made a real stamp on the Department. I wish him continued success.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank colleagues for their contributions. I thank Deputy Ward for tabling this amendment. Deputy Ward would be aware that we had a good conversation and discussion about his amendment on Committee Stage. We all share the same objective here. Obviously, CAB does an excellent job in seizing assets that are the proceeds of crime. In recent years, we have managed to develop a situation where we can get some of those assets and reinvest them back into the community. I want to see that sum of money growing each year. It is in the region of €4 million to €4.6 million this year. I want to see it continue to grow in order that more proceeds from crime will be put back directly into the communities affected by crime. Regarding what Deputies have said, everyone generally recognises that the entities that have been given funding under the community safety fund this year are deserving. I heard what Deputy Ward said in respect of the FAI, but it is a project that is called a game of two halves. When we look at the broad group of people and entities who have received money under the community safety fund, they are worthwhile.

The purpose of the amendment is to try to set out a statutory test that I will have to target money at areas that are indicated as being areas of high disadvantage under the Pobal scheme. As Deputy Ó Murchú said, we all know the areas of most disadvantage. The reason I did not accept the amendment on Committee Stage and cannot accept it here is that it is going to put in place a legal statutory process that would require me or another Minister to get a review every year and then ensure that I comply with the provisions set out in this amendment. It is a much better scenario for a Minister, whoever he or she may be, to be able to have an informal scheme whereby moneys can be given directly to all these worthwhile projects. I would love to have more time to respond, but I gave it to colleagues. There is a lot of great work being done by these projects around the country. I want to ensure that we get more money from the proceeds of crime and send it directly back into the community. For the reasons I have given now and on Committee Stage, I cannot accept the amendment.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Minister did not reference what I asked. If he cannot accept the amendment, will he have a look at the forms-----

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will.

Deputy Mark Ward: -----in order to allow front-line community organisation to compete with the likes of the FAI? They cannot compete with the manpower and expertise of organisations like the FAI when it comes to applying for funding. I am on a couple of boards in my area, including the Clondalkin addiction support programme and the Clondalkin Equine Club. The Clondalkin Equine Club is one example of a group that keeps young people off the streets. It is an urban horse programme. It has one part-time manager and there is a voluntary board of which I am a member. For that organisation to even apply for CAB funding takes a hell of a lot of manpower. If I can get one commitment from the Minister today, it would be for him to have a look at those forms and to put something in place that will help disadvantaged communities and organisations and make it easier for them to apply for the funding. Organised criminals offer absolutely nothing to our communities. All they do is rip the hearts out of them. They cause devastation and hardship in our areas.

I accept that this Bill will go some way towards making this a lot easier but I would still like to see this money redirected into the communities affected most.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Bill received for final consideration.

Question, "That the Bill do now pass", put and declared carried.

Planning and Development Regulations: Motions

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Before I call on the Minister to open the debate, I remind the Members that two separate motions are being debated in this slot: the motion regarding the proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025 and the motion regarding the proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 2) Regulations 2025. The motions will be moved separately but debated together. They will be decided by separate questions.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025,
a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 27th November, 2025.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the draft regulations and to set out the rationale and reasoning behind their development. The draft Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025 have regard to the existing planning exemption for the change of use of vacant commercial properties to residential use. The draft regulations

propose to amend the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended, by extending until 31 December 2028 the provision for change of use from commercial to residential in vacant properties under Article 10(6) of the 2001 regulations. This ensures that individuals can avail of the exemption without fear of enforcement as the current provision expires on 31 December 2025. No other elements of the exemption for change of use from vacant commercial to residential are being amended.

This is a very important extension. The exemption allowing for the conversion of vacant commercial properties for residential purposes has played a really important role in our villages, towns and cities. It has been quite positive and successful. Up to the end of 2024, the exemption had resulted in 1,457 notifications from developers intending to avail of the exemptions. If fully enacted, this would result in 3,429 new homes across the country. Planning authorities are required to report on the 2025 figures early next year. This information will be published on the Department of housing website.

It should be noted that the draft regulation is being prepared under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. This is due to the current provision expiry on 31 December 2025 and the relevant provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2024 not being commenced until 2026. When new exempted development regulations are made under the Act of 2024, the provisions regarding change of use from commercial to residential will be maintained.

The draft Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 2) Regulations 2025 provide for really important exemptions in relation to agricultural structures. They amend Schedule 2 of the 2001 regulations by increasing the provision of animal housing under class 6 of Part 3 of Schedule 2 by 50%, from 200 sq. m to 300 sq. m, increasing the total from 300 sq. m to 450 sq. m; and providing an exemption for a new class 6A of Part 3 of Schedule 2 comprising stand-alone slurry, effluent and soiled water storage up to 1,000 cu. m subject to a farm limit of 1,500 cu. m.

These proposals are being introduced to support increased space per animal and to assist farmers in the better management of farm slurry, effluent and soiled water to assist in protecting water courses and water bodies. While capacity for storage is increased, this is to accommodate existing levels of slurry, effluent and soiled water generated on farms, allowing for better slurry management, including optimal nutrient spreading on land. It is not to allow for increased animal stock density. These changes to increase the provision of animal housing under class 6 by 50% and to provide exemptions for stand-alone slurry, effluent and soiled water are particularly important for small and medium-sized farms. I engage regularly with farmers in my own county of Wexford and across the south east. These are very practical and important measures. The increase in the exemption under class 6 will assist small to medium farms with a 300 sq. m shed housing 38 dairy cows or 100 beef cows. The average dairy herd in the country is 90 cows.

It is important to note that these exemptions include limitations and conditions, including safeguards for the environment. For example, it is not possible to use these exemptions in a designated flood zone. Use of the exemptions requires that structures shall be constructed in accordance with Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage requirements and shall have regard to the need to avoid water pollution. An additional safeguard is that the use of class 6 or 6A agricultural exemptions

requires the prospective developer to obtain a declaration from the relevant planning authority under section 5 of the Act of 2000 declaring the exemption is applicable prior to commencement of construction. This provides surety that the proposed locations comply with the requirements of the exemptions. The requirement for a section 5 declaration is not an added burden to farmers as farmers are already required to obtain this declaration as part of any TAMS grant application.

Planning legislation provides general safeguards whereby planning exemptions are removed where works would materially affect a protected structure in accordance with section 57 of the Act of 2000 or where an environmental impact assessment or appropriate assessment is required in accordance with section 4(4) of the Act of 2000. Where planning exemptions are removed, planning permission is required. Where individuals are unsure whether they can avail of any exemption in planning, they may seek a declaration from a planning authority under section 5 of the Act of 2000 as to whether the proposed works are development and if such development is or is not exempted development. Similar to the change of use regulation, the draft regulation for agricultural exemptions is being prepared under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. This is due to the exemptions being a priority of Government. The proposed exemptions will be maintained in any exempted development regulations made under the Act of 2024

The purpose of the proposed regulations is to facilitate continued use of the change of vacant commercial to residential exemption until 2028, providing certainty on its availability. The agricultural exemptions provide support to the farming community to assist them in managing slurry, effluent and soiled water through increased storage capacity. If both sets of proposed regulations are approved by positive resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas as required under section 262(4) of the Act of 2000, it is intended to have the regulations signed into law at the earliest opportunity. Therefore, it is important that both sets of regulations are supported to provide certainty to those wishing to avail of their use into the future.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Sinn Féin will be supporting both sets of exempted development regulations. They are modest and reasonable and, in our view, they are sensible. We have no issue with them proceeding. However, I will put on the record of the Dáil my deep dissatisfaction at the manner in which the Minister has processed these regulations. As Members will know, this is the second time these regulations have been brought before the committee and the House in the space of a few short weeks. They were originally presented as a single regulation. When the Minister of State responsible came before the committee, he explained that, because the environmental assessment had not been completed, he might have to bring the regulations back in a revised form. We were then informed by way of a letter from the Minister of State that there was going to be a need for significant amendments to the agricultural exempted development regulations. In a move completely unprecedented in my decade in the Dáil, the Minister requested our committee to do something that, on foot of legal advice, we deemed not to be in line with Standing Orders and effectively illegal. He requested that we overturn a decision of the Oireachtas. The consequence of all of this is that the Minister and the Government may not meet their deadline of the end of this year for the over-the-shop exempted development regulations, which would have been an absolute disaster.

The reason I am saying this here is because there is going to be a series of other exempted development regulations coming before our committee. I have no doubt that there was a level of enthusiasm, shall I say, by the Minister of State to get these through but as a consequence of that, and, ultimately, the Minister is responsible for the actions of his junior Ministers, things took place that should not have. That meant that additional committee and Oireachtas time was required, and unnecessary delay could have been caused by his Department. I appeal to the Minister to ensure nothing like this happens again with any of the other modules of exempted development regulations. If something requires environmental assessment, the Department should wait for the environmental assessment to be complete and it should give us the regulation in completed form. Will he please make sure the enthusiasm of the Minister of State, who I know, has good intentions on this issue, is curbed a bit so our committee is not asked to do anything in future, in official communications from the Minister or his juniors, that is outside of Standing Orders? I do not think anybody in this House would see any of those requests as unreasonable.

Deputy Thomas Gould: As my colleague said, we are supporting both these motions. At committee, the Minister said these exempted developments have been hugely successful. While I believe commercial units being returned as homes is a good thing, it has not reached the potential it could. We look at villages and areas that I represent like Blackpool in Cork city, one of the oldest, most historic villages and parts of Cork city. Then we have Shandon with the renowned Shandon steeple, the church and the bells. We see these communities with shops, offices and pubs boarded up and closed for decades, not years. If these exempted developments were working, we would see the return of those properties as homes. As there are still businesses in the heart of these communities, were more people brought in to live in the communities, they would safeguard the existing business and bring more people in. That is what we want to see. We want to see communities flourish. We do not want to see communities blighted by dereliction, vacancy and boarded-up properties. Therefore, turning commercial businesses into homes in places like Blackpool and Shandon Street can be a really positive thing for the community. This is not just in Cork. We have areas like this in Drogheda, Tipperary and all across Dublin. It is in every town, village and city where we need to see more homes being delivered. If we are going to hit our 2030 targets, the best homes to deliver are homes that already exist. They might be shops, offices or pubs but if they are lying empty, turning them into homes is a win for communities, for the environment and, most importantly, for families out there who are crying out for homes.

This week, the Minister announced additional funding for vacant above-the-shop units to turn them into homes. We have been raising for years the issue of above-the-shop units that have been lying empty when they should have been turned into homes. That is what we want to see. This is all about delivery and the quickest, easiest way to deliver is to deliver homes and buildings that already exist. What we do not want to see - and what I certainly do not want to see - is speculators, investors and vulture funds coming in and getting the money that has now been earmarked, namely, a maximum of €140,000 per multi-unit or multi-apartment building. We want to see them delivered as affordable and cost-rental properties. If the Government is making this type of investment, speculators should not be coming in then and charging huge rents when they turn these buildings around. That may be something the Minister needs to look at as well in order that they are not just taking all the money from the State and then making huge profits. If they are going to be supported by the State, they should be

supporting communities and ensuring the rents they charge are reasonable. We have so much dereliction and vacancy and so many units above the shops that could really make a difference. That is why we are saying the only way for this to happen and the only way to deliver secure affordable homes for people is to use the units that already exist. It is not the only way but it is the quickest way. We support these motions. In the areas I represent, were the Minister to walk around Blackpool, Shandon Street or North Main Street, he could see these areas are crying out for investment and would be great communities for people to live in.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. In the spirit of Christmas, I too have no particular issue with what is being proposed here. Broadly speaking, I support anything, within reason, that helps somebody to turn a vacant commercial property into a permanent home. I also support measures that would make it easier for people to increase the provision of animal housing and exemptions for stand-alone slurry storage, within reason. I caution this by saying we have had a number of issues in Limerick in recent times in relation to Georgian buildings, the owners of which have benefited from the exempted development guidelines. In some cases, they have been fantastic. In other cases, they have been less than fantastic. We have had issues whereby people have bastardised buildings in Limerick without facing anything really in the realm of consequences from the local authority. We really need to resource our planning departments around enforcement. Otherwise, we will end up with more poor quality housing, which is definitely not what we need. We need to conserve our architectural heritage because we have lost many shopfronts and features in our Georgian cores, particularly in Limerick, due to people having benefited from this and having not done what they were supposed to do with the building.

Regarding the exemptions for animal housing and stand-alone slurry storage, I have a number of environmental concerns. Anything we do must remain strictly consistent with Ireland's obligations under EU and national environmental law, including the habitats, birds, water framework and nature restoration directives. Flexibility is important but it must also not undermine our environmental obligations. We need to make sure that what we are doing here is sustainable and that it does not increase intensification, and that slurry storage is subject to strict citing and separation standards. I am glad that an SEA and appropriate assessment of the proposal for the amended exemptions was conducted because I do not, as other speakers have outlined, think it was appropriate to have tried to do this without having done that. We cannot afford to address our housing and infrastructure needs at the expense of public safety, environmental resilience or compliance with EU and national law.

This brings me on to a brief point before I conclude about the upcoming exempted development guidelines for residential development. I have a slight concern there about the potential unintended consequences of the proposed changes around, essentially, substandard sheds being rented out on the private rental market without appropriate inspections and protections. I know that is not the intention but I am worried that this could become the unintended consequence without a proper regulatory framework to protect tenants and to protect the quality of our housing stock.

While the intention of this measure might not be to grow the private rental market, many of these units will invariably end up rented out without proper planning and a safety framework with tenant protections. I would like that noted. Broadly, however, I have no issue with these measures.

Deputy Rory Hearne: We will not be opposing these measures. I want to make some general points, particularly on the issue of tackling vacancy and dereliction. The grants the Minister announced this week are quite frustrating in many ways because there is no guarantee the public funding that is given out will actually go to ensuring the delivery of affordable homes. It is very frustrating because we are now seeing up to €140,000 per commercial property renovated being given to a potential investor, landlord or property owner, yet local authorities get just €11,000 per home they are trying to renovate, which in many cases are voids. There is a real problem in that we are not investing in our public housing stock and bringing affordable property back into use, while giving property investors up to €140,000 to do up a vacant property and bring it into residential use with no guarantee whatsoever that there will be affordability requirements.

The other figure to note is that 28% of all vacant property grants are going to landlords to rent out properties, again with no affordability requirements, yet the Department of housing is declaring, defining and counting the giving of those vacant property grants as affordable housing. It is not affordable housing; it is going to landlords.

If we really want to tackle vacancy and dereliction, local authorities need to be compulsorily purchasing properties on a significant scale. In my constituency, the Drake Inn in the heart of Finglas village has been sitting vacant for many years. Trees are growing out of the building and the city council, while it is levying fines on the owner, has not collected all the fines. How is it possible that a huge property in the heart of Finglas village is left vacant for many years to fall into ruin and damage the fabric of the community while the council just sits back and allows it? Councils should be compulsorily purchasing buildings like that but they do not have the funding and they do not have all the mechanisms to do so. When we talk about a commitment to tackling vacancy and dereliction, these issues must be addressed as well.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I wish the Ceann Comhairle and everyone here a happy Christmas.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I do not object to the Minister's plans but I have a few queries, including on the agricultural side. I welcome the exemptions. There are new regulations requiring farmers to collect soiled water. The exemption that they can put down a tank to gather that soiled water is a help. It is to be hoped they will get a targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, grant for it. That will help water quality right around the country, which is the bottom line.

The one part of it I am trying to fathom is that a lot of the councils, when they are giving exemptions, look at whether there is a special area of conservation, SAC, or natural heritage area, NHA, within 15 km of a property. If they start with that craic when it comes to the exemption, there will not be many parts of the country that will get it. I ask the Minister or his Department to give a direction to councils that common sense must prevail here. A person putting down a tank is saving soiled water from going into a field or somewhere it should not go. This is a good provision but it needs to be used in a common-sense way by planners when they are looking at the exemptions. Farmers have no problem going for the exemption but in

the west of Ireland, there is a huge number of designated areas, whether SACs or NHAs. If people have to go screening out and undertaking environmental impact assessments, EIAs, and appropriate assessments, when the whole basis of what they are doing is to protect against soiled water by having a tank, then it is contradicting the whole purpose of the regulation. Will the Minister work with his Department to give a direction to the councils in this regard? I welcome the provision regarding sizes. This is a good thing for the country. While the exemption is for the agricultural sector, it will help with water quality, as the Minister outlined in his speech.

The other measure concerns the changeover of buildings to allow a pub or whatever to be made into a residential property. Anything that will help with housing supply is a good thing. Anything that will give a roof over somebody's head is a good thing. We should welcome that people can do that without going through eight or ten weeks of rigorous planning requirements. I would love to see the croí cónaithe scheme simplified a small bit to speed it up but it is a good grant. We need to praise things when they are good and be good enough to say something is good.

Something I ask the Minister to look at is an issue that is very frustrating. In a document I sent in to the Minister's Department, I pointed out that seven years is the time within which people must have compliance with planning or if there is a non-compliance order. There are chimneys in old houses that cracked, were taken down and then slates were put up. That is a normal thing people did, using cop on as I would call it. They will not get an exemption because that is not in compliance with the house that was built 150 years ago. I ask the Minister to look at things like that. I welcome the regulations.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I welcome any changes to amend planning legislation. Something I would like the Minister to look at in the new year is listed buildings and building over listed buildings. In Limerick, we have a lot of listed buildings and many buildings which are stopping young people from living over them. I have no problem with the fire regulations but the problem is that conservation rules mean the inside of these buildings cannot be altered to allow people to live over them, as was done for decades and centuries. We want to get people back into those living areas.

We also need to look at the issue of buildings within the curtilage of a listed building. A property could be 30 m or 40 m away from a listed building but because it is within the curtilage, they say work must be sensitive to that. We need to make this work for people in the 21st century. People lived in these buildings from the 1400s, 1500s, 1600s and all the way up along the line and there was no such thing as curtilage. Now the front facade and the front roof structure must be protected. If there are buildings that can be brought back into use for young people or anybody who wants to live in them, we must allow them to modernise the inside. I am talking about houses, not iconic buildings. I know of a case where a young couple was allowed to extend onto the back of their house but the front part was listed. This was a street house. They were made keep the timber.

They said they could take down the timber, slab it and put the timber back up again. The costs would be massive. If we keep the front facade, the sash windows and the roofscape, we could make it look like the old street, but we should allow people to modernise the inside of

houses. I am not talking about iconic buildings. They must be protected. I am talking about buildings on the streets that people can live in. We must streamline the system.

I have one building at the moment that is in the curtilage of a listed building, which is in the care of the OPW. Planning permission was granted to renovate the house, which we have done. Planning permission was also granted to extend the property, but we are still waiting to do that because when the planning permission was given, they never saw that there was a building at the back of it. The building looks lovely architecturally but it is actually dangerous and it will fall into a neighbour's property. They now say they want to have this assessed. The cost of the assessment and the necessary works is €1 million and they do not have a penny to throw at it. I want to make the building safe and they are saying "No". I need the Minister's help in the new year to make sure we can get people back into towns and villages and into buildings that we can modernise while respecting the streetscape and iconic buildings. We must get people back into the upstairs of listed buildings.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: First of all, I wish you, a Cheann Comhairle, all the elected Members, all the staff, everyone involved in this great House and the people who are running it all the very best for Christmas and the new year.

I welcome the exemption for the change of use from vacant commercial properties to residential use. I thought that was in place, but if it is being regularised, that is all the better. I also welcome the increase in the provision of animal housing under class 6 of Part 3 of Schedule 2 by 50% from 200 sq. m to 300 sq. m and the increase in the total from 300 sq. m to 450 sq. m.

Everything at home is now measured by my grandson on the basis of how many sleeps there are until Christmas Day when Santa Claus comes. How many more sleeps will we have to endure before we do something about the strict urban generated pressure clause that is discriminating against many people in rural parts of Kerry and preventing them from obtaining planning permission, or even applying for it? I have asked for this so many times. Where or what is the hold-up? I thought that it was the Government's intention to sort this out. Is it the staff in the housing Department? Where is the blockage or what is happening? All these people are looking for is permission to build a house for themselves. They do not want one penny from any one of us inside here. All they want is to get permission to build a house.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Then there is-----

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

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thought I had seven and a half minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, we have other Members. Deputy Healy-Rae is only one of the "other Members". He has used up two and a half minutes of his time.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Could you give me another minute, a Cheann Comhairle?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not the way it works.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I understood that I had seven and a half minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mattie McGrath, but I will give Deputy Healy-Rae 30 seconds to finalise his points, seeing as he was caught off-guard.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The same blockage is caused on the national roads. People cannot get in or out on the national roads. What is the story with the granny flats? It is nine months now since the Minister mentioned that. Is there some hold-up on that? Can it be sorted out once and for all and put before us here? We do not have any affordable housing scheme in Kerry? What is going to happen with the new idea we have for treatment plants on unserviced land?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Will they be exempt from being zoned? Can it be decided by a planning application? Thank you very much, a Cheann Comhairle. I am sorry, I misunderstood the times.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too welcome many aspects of this legislation. It is very important that the Minister is making efforts in many areas, but we have a lot of strange things happening as well. Like Deputy Healy-Rae, I want to ask about the granny flats and modular units in the back garden. I will again mention Seán Meehan who is being prosecuted. He is being dragged through the courts for having his own little mobile home, which is encased in a lovely timber structure and doing no harm to anybody. There are no complaints from his neighbours along the whole road on which he lives.

I also want to ask the Minister about Ballypadeen in County Tipperary. I handed him a file on it some weeks ago. They are 52 of the finest houses ever constructed in this country and they had full planning permission. For some reason, the county council took issue with them in 2005 and 2006 and the case has been in the courts ever since. Some kind of clandestine deal has now been done behind closed doors. Obviously the council did not win, and it is going to demolish these houses. They are 52 of the finest houses, constructed with mass concrete, insulation, perfect roofs, perfect walls, perfect timber ceilings and timber ceilings upstairs. Now the council is going to knock them at a cost of between €7 million and €8.5 million. It will render the site back to a brownfield site and hand it back to the owner. What is going on? Will the Minister please contact Tipperary County Council and intervene? These 52 houses should be allocated to families on the housing list.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: There are some really good solid proposals here. I hope they can pass without any kerfuffle tonight. A few things were an eye-opener for me. I listened to the early part of the debate and then returned to my office, but I came back here. Some political parties and politicians are totally divorced from what is involved in farming and rural life. They expressed concern that a farmer should be given an exemption for slurry storage or for building

winter housing. In the name of God, where do they hope things will go? Do they want slurry running down fields and into streams? Is that what we want? Do we want cattle to be foddered outside all year round and farmers poaching fields with tractors? I will explain the term "poaching" for some of the urban TDs if they like. It does not mean going hunting; it means destroying the ground that they need to be in good condition to grow crops or to have hay or silage growing. This is just farcical stuff. The regulations are good solid stuff.

The other eye-opener was that if it is as simple as passing some of this with a motion, we must table more motions on various Wednesday nights in the springtime for granny flats and log cabins in back gardens to free up accommodation. We must ensure more of this can happen. I did not realise it is as simple as having a motion. It is very impressive that two major planning issues could be dealt with here so adeptly and swiftly tonight. Hopefully, in the springtime, more motions will be brought forward.

Deputy William Aird: I wish everybody a happy Christmas. I do not have the time to elaborate on it. It is not often I stand here and thank the Minister but I thank him for the work he has done. This is a great thing for farmers. It will be backed 100%. I am delighted with it.

Could the Minister please work on permissions for log cabins and modular homes to allow people to put a log cabin on a site in cases where they cannot afford a house, and also modular homes on a site or behind a house? This is a great plan. It will be a great help to people. It is not about wanting to live at home or in the backyard. It is about trying to save money in order to build a house.

I spoke to a young boy yesterday. He is 31 years of age and he got a mortgage yesterday for 35 years at €1,778 per month. He will be 66 when he has the mortgage paid. That is the reality we are living in at the moment. We will back the Minister 100% in this House on anything he can do to help these young people.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank Deputies for their support for both of the exemption regulations I have moved this evening. The first is an exemption to allow commercial properties to be converted for residential purposes and to allow that exemption to last for another three years. We will be looking to make that a permanent change because it is absolutely crucial that we revitalise our rural communities, and urban areas as well. This is a really important element of doing that, along with all the other changes we are making, such as getting Government approval this week for over-the-shop funding, the vacant refurbishment grants we already have in place and, of course, the rural and urban regeneration funds. This is a really important exemption for rural Ireland but also for urban areas.

The second exemption is really important for the farming community. It increases the exemption for animal housing by 50%, from 200 sq. m to 300 sq. m, and brings in an exemption for stand-alone slurry, effluent and soiled water to allow run-off.

This is a very practical change and important measure, in particular for our small and medium farmers. I regularly deal with small and medium farmers and this will help them an awful lot. I am glad to see some of our Wexford farmers up in the Public Gallery.

I wish the Ceann Comhairle and her family, the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, Deputy John McGuinness, and his family, a happy Christmas. I wish all their staff, the ushers and everybody working in the Oireachtas a happy Christmas.

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: It has been a positive debate. I also welcome the extended Doran family, whom I was not expecting to see in the Gallery, particularly with the Minister, Deputy Burke. They are more than welcome. I hope they are having a good evening.

Question put and agreed to.

Deputy James Browne: I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 2) Regulations 2025,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 9th December, 2025.

Question put and agreed to.

Presentation and Circulation of Revised Estimates 2026: Motion

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Revised Estimates for the Public Services for the year ending 31st December, 2026, be presented to the Dáil and circulated to members, pursuant to Standing Orders 103(1)(a) and 222.

Question put and agreed to.

Health (Waiting Lists) Bill 2024: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Health (Waiting Lists) Bill 2024, taken on Thursday, 11 December 2025. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 66; Níl, 80; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	

Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Colm.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Burke, Peter.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Butler, Mary.	
Cronin, Réada.	Butterly, Paula.	
Crowe, Seán.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cullinane, David.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cummins, Jen.	Calleary, Dara.	
Daly, Pa.	Canney, Seán.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Carrigy, Mícheál.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Chambers, Jack.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Clendennen, John.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Collins, Niall.	
Gannon, Gary.	Connolly, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gould, Thomas.	Daly, Martin.	
Graves, Ann.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Dillon, Alan.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Dolan, Albert.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Hearne, Rory.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Kenny, Martin.	Fleming, Sean.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Foley, Norma.	
Lawless, Paul.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Harkin, Marian.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Heydon, Martin.	
Murphy, Paul.	Higgins, Emer.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Keogh, Keira.	
Nash, Ged.	Lahart, John.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Lawless, James.	
Nolan, Carol.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McCormack, Tony.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McEntee, Helen.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moynihan, Michael.	

Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quaide, Liam.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Murphy, Michael.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Neville, Joe.	
Sheehan, Conor.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Sherlock, Marie.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Connor, James.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	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.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and John Clendennen.

Question declared lost.

Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) (Amendment) Bill 2023: Restoration to Order Paper (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 205, the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) (Amendment) Bill 2023, which lapsed on the dissolution of the 33rd Dáil, shall be restored at Order for Committee Stage and notice shall be published pursuant to Standing Order 37.

- (Deputy Paul Murphy)

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding restoration of Private Members' Bill to the Order Paper. On Tuesday, 16 December 2025, on the question, "That the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put.

The Dáil divided by electronic means.

Deputy Paul Murphy: As the gap between the votes is less than ten, given the importance of this matter, that this is about women's health and is about simply restoring a Bill to the Order Paper that already had passed Second Stage in the last Dáil, I am asking that we vote by means other than electronically. I ask people to look at their consciences and even shift from a "No".

(Interruptions)

Deputy Paul Murphy: Under Standing Order 88(3)(b), I propose that the vote be taken by other than electronic means.

Question again put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 71; Níl, 73; Staon, 4.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	Brophy, Colm.
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	Byrne, Malcolm.
Bennett, Cathy.	Brabazon, Tom.	Higgins, Emer.
Boland, Grace.	Brennan, Brian.	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brennan, Shay.	
Brady, John.	Browne, James.	
Buckley, Pat.	Burke, Colm.	
Butterly, Paula.	Burke, Peter.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Butler, Mary.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Carthy, Matt.	Cahill, Michael.	
Chambers, Jack.	Calleary, Dara.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Canney, Seán.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Cronin, Réada.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Crowe, Seán.	Clendennen, John.	
Cullinane, David.	Collins, Michael.	
Cummins, Jen.	Collins, Niall.	
Daly, Pa.	Connolly, John.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Cooney, Joe.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Daly, Martin.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Dillon, Alan.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Dolan, Albert.	
Gannon, Gary.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Geoghegan, James.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Fleming, Sean.	
Gould, Thomas.	Foley, Norma.	
Graves, Ann.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Harkin, Marian.	
Healy, Seamus.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	

Hearne, Rory.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Kenny, Martin.	Heydon, Martin.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Keogh, Keira.	
Lawless, James.	Lahart, John.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Lawless, Paul.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Lowry, Michael.	
McEntee, Helen.	Maxwell, David.	
McGettigan, Donna.	McCarthy, Noel.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Mitchell, Denise.	McCormack, Tony.	
Murphy, Paul.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Mythen, Johnny.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Nash, Ged.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Moynihan, Michael.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Moynihan, Shane.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Murphy, Michael.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Neville, Joe.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Nolan, Carol.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	O'Connor, James.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Quaide, Liam.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
Rice, Pádraig.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
Richmond, Neale.	O'Shea, John Paul.	
Sheehan, Conor.	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
Smith, Duncan.	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
Stanley, Brian.	Roche, Peter.	
Ward, Barry.	Scanlon, Eamon.	
Ward, Charles.	Smith, Brendan.	
Ward, Mark.	Smyth, Niamh.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Tóibín, Peadar.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Paul Murphy and Ruth Coppinger; Níl, Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Paul Lawless.

Question declared lost.

Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Fox Hunting) Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed)
[Private Members]

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Fox Hunting) Bill 2025, taken on Wednesday, 17 December 2025. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 24; Níl, 124; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Boland, Grace.	
Cummins, Jen.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Brady, John.	
Gannon, Gary.	Brennan, Brian.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Brennan, Shay.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Brophy, Colm.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Browne, James.	
Healy, Seamus.	Buckley, Pat.	
Hearne, Rory.	Burke, Colm.	
Murphy, Paul.	Burke, Peter.	
Nash, Ged.	Butler, Mary.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Butterly, Paula.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Quaide, Liam.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Cahill, Michael.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Calleary, Dara.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Canney, Seán.	
Smith, Duncan.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Ward, Charles.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	Carthy, Matt.	
	Chambers, Jack.	
	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
	Clendennen, John.	
	Collins, Michael.	
	Collins, Niall.	
	Connolly, John.	
	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
	Cooney, Joe.	
	Cronin, Réada.	
	Crowe, Cathal.	
	Crowe, Seán.	
	Cullinane, David.	

	Daly, Martin.	
	Daly, Pa.	
	Dempsey, Aisling.	
	Dillon, Alan.	
	Doherty, Pearse.	
	Dolan, Albert.	
	Donnelly, Paul.	
	Dooley, Timmy.	
	Ellis, Dessie.	
	Farrell, Mairéad.	
	Feighan, Frankie.	
	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
	Fleming, Sean.	
	Foley, Norma.	
	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
	Geoghegan, James.	
	Gould, Thomas.	
	Graves, Ann.	
	Guirke, Johnny.	
	Harkin, Marian.	
	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kenny, Martin.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Kerrane, Claire.	
	Lahart, John.	
	Lawless, James.	
	Lawless, Paul.	
	Lowry, Michael.	
	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McEntee, Helen.	
	McGettigan, Donna.	
	McGrath, Mattie.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	McGuinness, Conor D.	
	Mitchell, Denise.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	

	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Mythen, Johnny.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
	Nolan, Carol.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
	O'Hara, Louis.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Reilly, Louise.	
	O'Rourke, Darren.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Stanley, Brian.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Tóibín, Peadar.	
	Ward, Barry.	
	Ward, Mark.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Ruth Coppinger and Paul Murphy; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and John Clendennen.

Question declared lost.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.43 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 18 Nollaig 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.43 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 18 December 2025.

