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**Wednesday,  
11 February  
2026**

**DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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## **DÁIL ÉIREANN**

*Dé Céadaoin, 11 Feabhra 2026*

*Wednesday, 11 February 2026*

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

*Paidir agus Machnamh.*

*Prayer and Reflection.*

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### **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 whether agreement has been reached with all south Kerry CAMHS victims and families.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss the infrastructure in schools in Kildare North.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss the Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern - To discuss issues on the F1 bus route for commuters in Dublin South-West.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss contingency arrangements for children awaiting community ophthalmology services in Tipperary South.

Deputy Joe Cooney - To discuss the minor works scheme.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the delivery of level 2 general palliative care services in the community, including clinical nursing services outside normal working hours in County Louth.

Deputy Pearse Doherty - To discuss the impact of the loss of Donegal to Dublin afternoon flights.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss plans by Tipperary County Council to demolish 52 partially-completed houses in Cashel, County Tipperary.

Deputy Brian Brennan - To discuss the proposed closure of the Merck factory in Arklow, County Wicklow.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the review of the Garda vetting process and planned measures for simplification.

Deputy Joanna Byrne - To discuss implementing the agreed pension payment increases to retired staff of Eir and An Post.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the allocation of SET and SNA hours for primary schools.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss school building projects in County Cork.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the need for increased resources for An Garda Síochána in the mid-west.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the provision of school accommodation at St. Mochta's National School, Louth village.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss special needs classes at Ballyduff national school.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the additional accommodation project at a Coláiste De Lacy, Ashbourne, County Meath.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the housing aid for older people grant and the provision of new boilers.

Deputy Emer Currie - To discuss core funding for 2026.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss the need for the Department of Education and Youth to avoid building on a GAA pitch at a school by working with the school on an alternative location for all three modular ASD units, and delaying its deadline of 13 February, pending further discussions.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss emergency funding needs for a Gaelscoil.

The matters raised by Deputies Michael Cahill, Mattie McGrath, Joanna Byrne and Rory Hearne have been selected for discussion.

### **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

#### **Vacant Properties**

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue on a very important matter. I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, but I am very disappointed there is no Minister or Minister of State from the Department of housing present. There is a housing crisis and we have a proposal to knock 52 almost-complete houses in Cashel, County Tipperary.

Tipperary County Council plans to demolish 52 partially-completed houses under Part 8 development. The decision defies logic in the middle of a national housing emergency. These units are not mere shells. They were all finished. Many of the windows and doors have been vandalised, through no fault of the developer. I compliment the developer on such fine, sturdy mass concrete houses. They have mass concrete foundations, mass concrete lintels down on piles on a very solid site overlooking Cashel. They have mass concrete floors, mass concrete

walls, mass concrete first ceilings and mass concrete ceilings on top as well. These are the kinds of houses we are dealing with. All the roofs bar one are perfect. One roof is slightly damaged, either through vandalism or by the weather. The units are, as I said, not mere shells as many have windows, doors, plumbing and electrics. Independent assessments describe them as solid structures that are far from derelict. Importantly, a number of developers have expressed interest in redeveloping the site. However, instead of exploring refurbishment Tipperary County Council seeks to demolish them entirely. We have 3,600 families or persons on the approved housing list in the county and here there is 1,800 sq. m of housing - 52 fine and spacious three-bedroom houses which the council seeks to knock down. They could be luxury houses. When there is huge housing demand across the county it is indefensible that viable housing stock is to be destroyed rather than repurposed for private, social, affordable or indeed health accommodation.

Even more concerning is the lack of transparency about the costs. An independent quantity surveyor's report estimates a cost of €8 million for the demolition and remediation, yet the council has continually refused to release full costs to my office via freedom of information requests. The public and elected representatives are being asked to accept a multimillion euro demolition without access to the basic financial information needed to evaluate the site. Furthermore, they have been ordered not to visit the site. They were told they could be trespassing, which is not true according to the man who owns the site. The council states the buildings were originally intended as tourist accommodation and that the site is unzoned and outside the settlement boundary. However, that has all changed. We are 20 years on and we are in an emergency. National housing policy demands flexibility and reuse, not rigid adherence to outdated classifications. When thousands of people need homes we need to think outside the box. These houses were granted full planning permission in a decision that was upheld in the courts over a long number of years, but now the same council that granted permission seeks to demolish them.

Environmental policy is equally contradicted. Demolishing 52 concrete structures will create 13,582 tonnes of waste and this runs against Government commitments on sustainability and waste reduction. It flies in the face of the principles of low-carbon and climate-resilient development. The phrase, "The greenest building is the one that is already built", acknowledges that. This embraces the embedded carbon in these buildings and the enormous energy used to construct them. I have more to say but I will do so in my reply.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am glad to have the opportunity on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne, to clarify the position regarding the demolition of these partially completed houses at Ballypadeen, Cashel in Tipperary. The Minister sends his apologies. He will be in the House for five hours for the debate on the residential tenancies Bill and cannot attend this morning.

Working to end dereliction and vacancy is a key priority in the Government's new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. The programme for Government and the housing plan contain a range of measures to address dereliction. However, the reality is that some unfinished units cannot be saved and require demolition.

In respect of the property referenced above, neither the derelict units in question nor the site they were built on are owned by Tipperary County Council. The units were constructed over 20 years ago as tourism accommodation ancillary to a permitted hotel. They were not designed, permitted or ever intended for permanent residential use and they have remained incomplete for almost 20 years.

The land in question is unzoned, poorly serviced and located outside the settlement boundary of Cashel. Were it deemed suitable for long-term social housing development, the local authority may have considered a compulsory purchase order, CPO. However, there is no viable option to adapt the existing structures for residential use. The extent of work required to meet modern residential standards would be prohibitive and likely necessitate full demolition and reconstruction.

I understand the council is currently progressing a Part 8 planning application to remove the derelict structures as part of the agreed remediation approach. The future development of the land after that remediation is complete rests entirely with the owners. Any proposals will be subject to the county development plan and the statutory planning process.

Tipperary County Council's social housing delivery under Housing for All was ahead of target and it is expected to continue its strong record of delivery under the housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. I firmly believe the commitment Government has made to address vacancy and dereliction and the actions under Delivering Homes, Building Communities will play a vital role in delivering homes across the country. Notwithstanding that, effective use of Exchequer funding is essential and only viable projects should proceed. It is unfortunate, as the Deputy has raised, that some incomplete developments need to be demolished but, in this case, demolition of these unfinished units is necessary given they are in private ownership and not suitable for long-term residential use.

I thank Deputy McGrath for raising this important issue and I hope this goes some way to explaining the rationale behind this decision.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** There is no rationale. That is why the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, is not here to take my Topical Issue. I handed a file to the Minister six to eight weeks ago in this regard.

First, I thank Liam Campion, his wife and family. They are builders and providers who are building apartments - six-storey blocks - in this city today, as well as in Cork city. They have been building for nearly 50 years. They built what is known as the Twin Towers estate in Cashel, which is a fine, noble housing estate. These houses are not semi-derelict. I wanted to ask the Minister – I thought I would meet him today but I will meet him later – or the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, to visit these houses. The site is located five minutes off the main N8.

These houses are suitable for any type of building. They are solid structures. They are the best I have seen in a long time, and I have some experience in the game. They have mass concrete walls, ducting for all the wires, plumbing and everything else. Some 50 submissions have gone in under the Part 8 but the Part 8 has been turned on its head because when I visited the site last Monday with the owner, we met people there who were from a demolition company. When asked why they were there, they explained they were there as a result of an tender that

was out two weeks before the Part 8 process closed. The tender was put out by Tipperary County Council. There is an indecent haste to demolish these houses.

The council is ahead of its targets and while I support the council staff, I do not support senior management and what they are doing here. I attended a meeting with the CEO some time ago but I was told at the meeting she was unable to attend. I could not get answers from any of the directors. There are a lot of unanswered questions in this regard.

The Minister of State told me that these houses were built with planning. They were built with full planning, alongside planning for a 120-bed hotel. Many estates around the country were built likewise, with both hotels and accommodation. Many have been transformed and turned into accommodation. Anything could be done with them, from social housing, which we so badly need, to a health facility. We need a 60-bed health facility in Cashel. The Minister of State knows that. We cannot get a site for it, however. This is an ideal site. A site at Palmershill is being looked at but it is much more inaccessible. This site, however, has a roadway and all developed into it. The site and the houses are as solid as the Rock of Cashel. It is a crying shame and an insanity to demolish these houses and dispose of all this. It will cause that carbon footprint and leave the site scarred because the foundations and the base will not be removed.

It is said that this is being done for the Rock of Cashel. Is a view more important than houses for families in Ireland? It seems that with this Government, the views and anything are more important. This is insanity. The definition of insanity, according to Einstein, is to keep doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results. Please halt this. Pause this demolition and re-evaluate it.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I thank Deputy McGrath for his useful information. I will bring it back to the Minister. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is focused on ensuring that existing houses are utilised to their full extent. The Government's new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, reinforces and expands the range of measures being implemented by the Government to work to end dereliction and long-term vacancy. One of these actions involves an expanded buy and renew scheme, which is due to launch imminently. The Minister, Deputy Browne, updated the Government on Tuesday about the scheme. It will allow for suitable vacant and derelict buildings to be remediated back to rental standards and designated as social homes. The scheme will be open to local authorities, approved housing bodies and small builders or contractors. Further information will be available in the coming weeks. It will be a matter for all local authorities, including Tipperary County Council, to identify viable proposals. The Government does not intend to override these important local functions.

As I said, it is unfortunate that some incomplete developments need to be demolished but in the case of this particular development in Tipperary, demolition of these unfinished units is deemed necessary by the local authority given they are in private ownership and not suitable for long-term residential use.

The Deputy outlined that a lot of houses and apartments were built as part of hotel developments around the country. A lot of them are not in use. Anything that we and the local authorities can do to bring them back into use is useful and helpful. However, on this occasion, there are issues for the local authority, obviously. It has not been able to address this issue. I

thank Deputy McGrath again for bringing this to the attention of the Dáil. I will raise it with the Minister when I see him later.

### **Mental Health Services**

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** At the outset, I acknowledge the tremendous work that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has carried out over many years now. Absolutely no one knows more about the CAMHS scandal, as it is now known, in Kerry than the Minister of State. I acknowledge that at all times when meetings were requested, etc., she agreed to attend. As a councillor many years ago now, I was invited up by the south Kerry CAMHS families. I was the first in Kerry to be asked to come up to try to help in what was a horrendous ordeal for many individuals and young children, many of whom are now young adults. In that context, I thank the Minister of State.

Are all the individuals concerned sorted out with regard to compensation and services? I know many of these families and individuals personally. I have dealt with them for a long time. Lives were ruined, to be honest. They were mis-medicated and misdiagnosed. In the early days, little did we know that there were hundreds involved. We all know about the north Kerry CAMHS situation that followed. It is hugely important that all these people involved, including their families, are receiving the right services today. I sincerely hope a similar type of situation will never again arise.

I am not sure what happened to the Topical Issue I submitted but it was two-pronged; it was about north Kerry as well.

I sincerely hope it is a similar case in north Kerry and that the individuals and their families are being dealt with.

A question that has been asked time and again relates to the north Kerry CAMHS lookback review, which is long overdue. I know it is not in the question but I do not know what happened there. I had included the whole lot in the one question but it must have been divided or whatever.

I have been in the houses of these young individuals who were affected and they were like zombies. Many of these people are the brightest you will ever come across, not only in this country but in the world. Their intelligence and everything else is beyond description. I know one young lady who is fluent in the Japanese language, for example.

I wish to mention Davin Godfrey, who has been a spokesperson for the CAMHS families in Kerry. He is from Listowel and is going to train to be a lawyer. His story fascinated me. I spent two and a half hours with him, his mum and his grandmother a number of years ago. I remember the day because it was the day the late Senator, Paul Coghlan, was being waked. I went from Killarney to their home in Listowel. He told me he used to go to court cases and sit at the back. In many ways, he more or less educated himself.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I thank Deputy Cahill and I acknowledge the work he has done regarding the situation with CAMHS services in Kerry when he was a councillor and when he met me as well as the advocacy work he did

with the families and the parents. I am happy to be here this morning to take his question and I will answer as best I can.

As the Deputy will be aware, as Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, I was in this role when the Maskey report was published in 2022. The report examined deficits relating to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, CAMHS, in south Kerry. The Maskey report examined the files of everyone who received care from south Kerry CAMHS between 1 July 2016 and 19 April 2021. It identified that 240 young people did not receive the standard of care they should have had from CAMHS.

At the time, the HSE issued an apology, offered open disclosure meetings to the cohort identified as having suffered potential harm or injury or risk of harm or injury in south Kerry, and instigated a series of follow-up actions and changes. The Deputy will remember that at the time I, as Minister of State, commissioned a national audit from the HSE in relation to every single CAMHS team in Ireland. I also asked the Mental Health Commission to carry out a national review. These were all concluded and the CAMHS teams outside of Kerry, in the review and in the audit, did not see the same challenges regarding the overprescribing we saw in Kerry.

The Government acknowledged these deficits at the time and, as the Deputy said, I worked closely with my Government colleagues, including the Attorney General, to introduce a non-adversarial route for children and their families to seek compensation for the shortfall in care received. Following on from this, and the challenges we have seen in Kerry, I established the first ever national child and youth mental health office in the HSE to drive reform of CAMHS. I appointed a national clinical lead for child and youth mental health services for the first time and directed a national prescribing audit. I subsequently published the child and youth mental health action plan last year, which details 17 areas for service improvement. Implementation of the action plan is under way, and I monitor progress very closely.

This also resulted in the development and delivery of the Kerry CAMHS compensation scheme, which is managed and administered by the State Claims Agency on behalf of the HSE. As of 12 January 2026, four weeks ago, the State Claims Agency received 231 applications to the south Kerry CAMHS compensation scheme. As we know, there were 240 cases. Payments on account had been made to 227 applicants following an application verification process. Mediations were also ongoing, and 120 of these had taken place up to 12 January, resulting in 111 settlements, four cases for determination by the mediator and five adjourned for further investigations.

I understand there is one lead firm of solicitors representing most of the remaining applicants to the scheme. Subject to the solicitors' capacity to progress their caseload, the State Claims Agency aims to finalise the remaining cases in the next 18 months. The State Claims Agency continues to engage with the processes involved in the compensation scheme. As the Deputy will appreciate, I do not have access to a list of settlement amounts paid out by the State Claims Agency, and I will speak to north Kerry when I come back in.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I thank the Minister of State.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** I remind the Deputy it is best not to identify individuals by name.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I acknowledge the work that has been done here. I call for the outstanding cases to be expedited and dealt with as soon as possible. I recall the first and second time I was up here and one of the representatives of the recent hunger strikers. I acknowledge the fact that at the time, the HSE issued an apology but I reiterate a call I have made many times, which is that they deserve a public apology from the Taoiseach. I have spoken with the Taoiseach recently on this matter and the Minister of State might engage with him on that matter. It is the least these families and individuals deserve.

It is important all cases are dealt with as soon as possible both in north and south Kerry. It is also important the north Kerry CAMHS review is published. To be honest, I am raising it all the time. The CEO of the HSE, Mr. Gloster, mentioned something at the last meeting - this was only in the past two weeks - which was that we should not be looking back but looking forward. I hope that will be the case for all the families involved and that they can get on with their lives and flourish in every sense. I wish them the very best and good health and happiness going forward.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** Following a national audit of prescribing CAMHS, which we spoke about, where we did a random sample audit of 50 files in the case of every CAMHS team in the country, all 76 of them at the time, concerns were identified in 16 of 50 files reviewed in CAMHS in north Kerry. This prompted a lookback review of all cases open to CAMHS as of 21 November 2022.

My main priority, and this will always remain, is that the children and families will be communicated with throughout the lookback process, which has happened. All families where the potential for harm was identified were invited to open disclosure meetings with the HSE. I reiterate I am speaking about Kerry north now. Apologies were issued and families have been offered supports from a clinical liaison support team.

My Department received the final report over the weekend. I am now reading the report and considering next steps. I want to publish it as soon as possible, being mindful that families need to receive it without delay. Families will receive the report first, after I bring it to Cabinet.

They will not hear it from the media or when they go to their local shop. I am adamant about that. I will work with my Government colleagues, including the Attorney General, to decide the next steps. In response to the Deputy's invitation to me and to the Minister for children, Deputy Foley, I will be visiting Kerry shortly, as soon as I publish the report.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Sula mbrúnn muid ar aghaidh chuig an gcéad ábhar eile, nuair a bhí an phaidir á rá agam níos luaithe ag tús an tseisiúin, chuir sí i gcuimhne dom gurb é inniu Lá Fhéile Gobnait, an 11 Feabhra. Is lá mór é do mhuintir Mhúscraí. Leanfaidh muid ar aghaidh leis an gcéad ábhar eile in ainmneacha na dTeachtaí Byrne agus Guirke, to the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport.

## Public Sector Pensions

**Deputy Joanna Byrne:** I hope that after this matter being raised with the Department by myself and members of all parties and none over recent weeks and months, through umpteen parliamentary questions, on Leader's Questions and in various Topical Issues debates, that the Minister of State has some better news today for the Eir and An Post pensioners. I hope that he listened to the retired workers from Eir and An Post who were outside the Dáil yesterday demanding immediate action on pension increases already agreed and unjustifiably withheld. We stood with them yesterday and listened to their concerns. It is never seemly for the Government to have pensioners protesting outside this House. If the Government wants to do something about this, it is in its gift to do so. The increases have already been agreed by unions, trustees, actuaries and the companies' boards but the Government is sitting on its hands. We do not know why.

The An Post and Eir pensioners do not receive annual State pension increases. They rely on these agreed adjustments to meet basic living costs. The Government knows this and its inaction makes a mockery of its stated commitment to protecting vulnerable pensioners and addressing the cost-of-living pressures they face. The pension schemes are well regulated, they have plenty of money in them and there is no cost to the Exchequer. In response to my question on this matter three weeks ago, the Minister said that the Department and all relevant stakeholders "are endeavouring to achieve the same at the earliest, keeping in line with the appropriate processes, compliance with all applicable requirements, and necessary approvals." Are we there yet? It is as simple as that.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** We condemn the continued delay in implementing the agreed pension increase for An Post and Eir pensioners, despite a deal brokered between unions, including the Communications Workers' Union, An Post, Eir and Government officials. The agreement provides for payments to more than 7,000 affected An Post pensioners who remain without the payments they were promised. This delay contradicts the Government's stated commitment to protecting vulnerable pensioners and addressing the cost-of-living pressures currently being faced by them.

The Communication Workers' Union secured what is widely recognised as a reasonable and overdue restoration of pension value but the pace of Government endorsement has undermined the very purpose of the agreement. The lack of timely ministerial correspondence and action has left An Post and Eir pensioners stuck waiting for money that is rightfully theirs, undermining trust in both State institutions and the administration of pension schemes. Pensioners must not bear the brunt of political delays or bureaucratic inertia. I call for guaranteed, timely relief for pensioners and for the restoration of parity between pensioner's pay and active pay wherever possible. The current impasse risks compounding financial hardship for pensioners who already face rising costs of living, including higher heating bills, and constrained budgets.

The Minister of State corresponded with the pensioners on Monday last. He signed off on the agreement but the Minister for Social Protection needs to do so as well. While that correspondence was a welcome step forward, there was no mention of the Eir pensioners or of when the increase is going to be paid. In what month this year does the Minister of State expect An Post and Eir pensioners to get their agreed pension entitlements? They have worked hard all of their lives and are now being poorly treated by the State regarding their entitlements.

**Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I thank Deputies Byrne and Guirke for raising this matter this morning. Under section 46 of the Postal and Telecommunications Services Act 1983, the Minister for Culture, Communication and Sport, with the concurrence of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, approves any superannuation schemes submitted by An Post, including proposals to increase pensions and deferred pensions. The requirement to seek approval from both Ministers is also reiterated in the code of practice for the governance of State bodies in the remuneration and superannuation annex. The operation of the schemes is then a matter between the management of An Post, staff representatives and the trustees of the schemes.

On 23 October 2025, An Post wrote to the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport requesting consent for an increase to pensions in payment and deferred pensions. The proposal was to increase pensions in payment for members and deferred members of the An Post superannuation scheme by 6% per annum with effect from 1 January 2025 and 1% from 1 June 2025, arising from its agreements with employee representative groups. Correspondence from An Post indicates that this agreement was made with the An Post group of unions on 9 September 2025. On receipt of the proposal my Department carried out an initial review and subsequently, on 30 October 2025, the Department requested advice from NewERA to aid the Ministers' consideration of the approval request. This is in line with section 2.13 of the code of practice for the governance of State bodies superannuation and remuneration annex, which sets out that NewERA advice should be sought in respect of pension amendment proposals, as is appropriate in its role as commercial and financial advisor to the Ministers. On receipt of advice from NewERA, the Department prepared a submission recommending ministerial approval for the proposed increases. The proposal was approved by me on 4 February 2026 and by the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, on 5 February 2026. On foot of those approvals, also on 5 February, the Department, in line with the 1983 Act and the code of practice, submitted a business case to the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, seeking the concurrence of the Minister, Deputy Chambers, for the increases.

I will now turn to the matter of the pension increase request for Eir pensioners. Eircom Limited, trading as Eir, was formerly a commercial State body, Telecom Éireann, which was privatised in 1999. Telecom Éireann was established under the Postal and Telecommunications Services Act 1983. Section 46 of that Act enabled Telecom Éireann to prepare and submit a pension scheme to the Minister, along with other superannuation provisions. The former Telecom Éireann main superannuation scheme is now known as the Eircom superannuation scheme. Section 10 of that scheme stipulates that Eircom Limited may grant pension increases to members, as authorised by the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport with the concurrence of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

On 8 August 2025, Eir wrote to the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport requesting consent for a pension increase of 2.1% for Eir pensioners, in respect of both pre- and post-vesting day service with effect from 1 July 2025. The pension increase followed board approval for a salary increase for serving staff with effect from 1 July 2025. The pension increase is determined by the pensions accord 2010 and by the average rate of the consumer price index, CPI, throughout the calendar year 2024. On receipt of the proposal, the

Department of Culture, Communications and Sport carried out an initial review and engaged with the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment on the procedures involved. On 17 November 2025, the Department requested advice from NewERA to aid the Ministers' consideration of the approval request. A copy of the triennial valuation report and a report on the financial condition of the Eircom No. 2 superannuation fund were subsequently submitted to NewERA. NewERA provided a comprehensive report on the proposed increases on 6 February 2026. Department officials are now considering the report with a view to making a submission to the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport shortly.

While it is important that pensions approval processes are carried out with careful consideration by Departments and NewERA, the Department does understand that waiting for approval is frustrating for both workers and pensioners. The An Post pension increase request is currently under consideration by the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. This is the final step in the approvals process. The Eir pension increase request is under consideration by officials in my Department.

It is important to note that the pension increases cannot be considered agreed or implemented until such time as ministerial approval from both Departments has been obtained. It should be recognised that the time taken for the pension approval process is necessary to ensure that robust governance procedures are in place, that the code of practice is complied with and the relevant legislation is adhered to.

**Deputy Joanna Byrne:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. The requested 6% increase for An Post pensioners and 2.1% increase for Eir pensioners are minuscule in the greater scheme of things. We are in a cost-of-living crisis. The cost of absolutely everything has gone up and while it is pennies to the Government, it is massive to these people who served this State for decades. I note in the Minister of State's response that the Department has acknowledged that the waiting time for approval is frustrating for both workers and pensioners. We need to develop a better system going forward.

These vulnerable people, who have served the State for decades, cannot be left waiting like this. I urge the Minister of State to do anything he can to get this across the line for Eir and An Post pensioners.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** The Minister of State said:

The An Post pension increase request is currently under consideration by the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. This is the final step in the approvals process. The Eir pension increase request is under consideration by officials in my Department.

It is important to note that the pension increases cannot be considered agreed or implemented until such time as ministerial approval from both Departments has been obtained. It should be recognised that the time taken for the pension approval process is necessary to ensure that robust governance procedures are in place ...

Those involved want to know, and we call on the Government to immediately confirm, the timing and method of payment to all eligible An Post and Eir pensioners without further delay.

It is time these workers' rights were acted on. It has gone on long enough. We need to know when these people will get paid.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank Deputies Byrne and Guirke. I have outlined the timelines. While these pension increases were to apply with regard to An Post from 1 January 2025, the agreement relating to the increase was not agreed between the unions and An Post until September 2025. It was only at that point that it was agreed. The agreement went to the Department at the end of October, as has been outlined. Governance mechanisms and the need to make appropriate decisions require that the Department must engage with NewERA because there has to be an assessment in order to identify whether it is appropriate. We referred the agreement to NewERA at the end of October and we got it back in the past number of weeks. It then came to me with a recommendation for approval and I signed off within a day or two - on the day I received it or the day after certainly - as did the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. Over a week or so ago, it went to the Minister for public expenditure. It has, therefore, only been with him for that length of time. I have no doubt he will deal with it expeditiously.

There has not been any dragging of feet on the Government's part in relation to the timelines. It was agreed with the unions at the end of September and it came to us at the end of October. We asked NewERA to do carry out an assessment and advise us, and we are now expediting the matter. I fully understand the importance for people of having their pensions and getting their increases. I am very conscious of that. We are acting as expeditiously as we possibly can. I have no doubt that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will do the same and will be considering it now, particularly as it has been with him for the past week or so.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** Does the Minister of State have any idea when it will be progressed?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** As people can see from the outline I provided, we have been acting very promptly. I do not believe it could have been done in a shorter timeframe. NewERA had to do its assessment, look at the fund and the request relating to it and make recommendations to the various Ministers. As soon as I got it, I signed off on it. It has gone to the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I have no doubt he will act very promptly. Our objective is to get this applied as soon as possible. We understand that it is very important.

### **School Funding**

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** This matter relates to Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin on Glasanaon Road in Finglas, Dublin 11. A number of parents contacted me to outline some very serious concerns regarding the condition of the school building. Tá an-fhearg agus an-fhuistrachas ar na tuismitheoirí. The building is simply not in an acceptable state. The parents highlighted the fact that the teachers in the school do an excellent job but that the school is located in an extremely old and visibly deteriorating building that is no longer fit for purpose. It was originally built as a boys' school, and there has been a long-standing promise from the Department of education that a new building would be provided. Unfortunately, no meaningful progress has been made, leaving the children and the staff to continue in unacceptable conditions.

We are all well aware of the weather we have seen in the past month and the floods that are happening across the country. Unfortunately, this weather is having a particular impact on the school in question. Due to the recent spell of bad weather, the school hall is leaking badly. As a result, children have been unable to use the yard at break times and they are missing PE classes and all indoor school sports activities. These children are stuck behind their desks from the moment they go into school in the morning until they leave in the afternoon. As we know, what we promote all the time is as much physical activity as possible for children during the school day and during the day in general. It is so important for their physical and mental health. Many children need various breaks and space to be able to move around. This is not a minor inconvenience; it represents a failure to meet basic standards.

As stated, the teachers and staff in Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin do an amazing job, but they are being asked to do it in extremely challenging conditions. Children should be provided with a safe and healthy environment to learn in. The Department has a clear obligation to ensure that if a building is not safe that emergency measures are taken. The parents and staff are looking for a clear and realistic timeline for the long-promised new school building. They are also seeking to ensure that immediate remedial works are carried out in order that the children can safely return to normal play and PE without further delay. Will the Minister of State ensure that funding is prioritised for Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin? The leak has to be fixed immediately, and the vital and overdue works needed to improve the school and the facilities there must be undertaken. I look forward to hearing the response of the Minister of State.

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan):** I wish the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach a happy St. Gobnait's day. This is a hugely important day in his home territory, and it is important to recognise that.

I thank Deputy Hearne for raising the matter of the Gaelscoil in Finglas. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Naughton. The purpose of the Department's emergency works scheme is to provide funding specifically for unforeseen emergencies or to facilitate inclusion and access for pupils with additional needs. It does so by ensuring the availability of funding for urgent works for those schools that are in need of it as a result of an emergency situation. An emergency is deemed to be a situation which poses an immediate risk to health, life, property or the environment, which is sudden, unforeseen and requires immediate action, and which, if not corrected, would prevent a school or a part thereof from opening.

The scheme operates on the basis of a minimal scope of works required to address an emergency situation. It is intended to remedy emergency situations and usually provides interim measures until permanent solutions can be delivered under the summer works scheme, which deals with upgrade works to schools. In the case of outdoor play areas, this usually includes repairs to existing play areas. Each application is assessed on its merits.

In the case of the school to which Deputy Hearne refers, there is no emergency works application outstanding with the Department. The emergency works scheme is open to primary and post-primary schools that have permanent recognition and that are in non-rented accommodation. In order to make applications, schools must complete the online emergency works application form that is available on the Department's system.

As Deputy Hearne will be aware, details in respect of the climate action summer works scheme for 2026 and onwards were also announced in 2025. The purpose of this scheme is to devolve funding to individual school authorities to undertake small-scale building works which, ideally, can be carried out during the summer months or at other times that avoid disruption. The scheme will operate on a multi-annual basis.

Deputy Hearne made a point about children participating in the entire curriculum. That is very important. I note the points he made regarding the old building and the fact that the Gaelscoil is operating in it. I have no doubt about the excellent work being done there by the school community. We thank them for the work they do.

Deputy Hearne also mentioned that the roof of the PE hall is leaking. We have experienced, particularly since October, a huge amount of rainfall. It was one of the wettest winters in quite some time.

I do not have the specifics regarding the roof and the damage that has been done to it but I urge the school to engage with the Department in relation to emergency works because it is important that all of the school building is accessible. The school is there to provide education across academia along with PE and so forth. It is important that an application is made in that regard. I note the points the Deputy has made on the ongoing issue of a new school building. I will take those points back but, in the first instance, if there are works that can be done immediately, I encourage the Deputy and the school authorities to engage with the Department to see if progress can be made.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I will again emphasise that, as the Minister of State has outlined, we have had a serious weather situation. I am sure it is not the only school in the country facing situations like this. Indeed, I know it is not. In my constituency and across the country, there are issues in relation to school buildings being kept up to standard. We have an issue in that the capitation grant given to schools is not sufficient to cover the basic cost of running a school. That is why parents are being asked all of the time to cover these costs through what is called a voluntary contribution. Of course, in many cases, it does not feel very voluntary. There is a need to increase investment in schools and in education to ensure we do not see situations such as the situation in Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin in Finglas. I will engage with the school. I look forward to the Department responding very positively to applications for emergency funding. I again ask for prioritisation because we really should not be in this position. A new school building should be in place. I ask the Department to look at this again and to come back to me on the development of that new school building.

I will again highlight what the parents have said. One said that, as a parent, it is completely infuriating to watch their children's physical health, emotional well-being and educational experience compromised while their tax contributions appear to be squandered on projects such as expensive bike sheds and walls rather than spent addressing issues at a school that is literally crumbling around the children inside it. That is the parents' experience and feeling. We need to acknowledge that and do much better.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I thank the Deputy for the points he has made. Record investment is going into the Department of education's capital programme for developments

right across the country. Over the past number of years, record investment has been made in the building stock across the system. We recently announced over €7.5 billion in school investment through the national development plan. Thousands of schools across the country have seen investment in upgrading their facilities. I will make the point that we are acutely aware that investment in education, whether on the capital side or current, pays dividends as regards the long-term well-being of society. The more we invest in education, the better the outcomes for children into adulthood. We have seen that in Irish society over 100 years. I ask that the Gaelscoil engage with the Department in relation to the immediate issues to see if there is a pathway forward to deal with them through the Department's emergency works programme. I pay tribute to all of those working on the capital programme within the Department of education to make sure we are targeting the schools that really need investment. A lot of that has been laid out over the past while and a lot more will be done. At the end of the day, in relation to the school the Deputy raised this morning and the issues regarding a leaking roof, it is important the school engage with the Department and make an application. That will be adjudicated on in accordance with the terms and conditions of the scheme. We will also come back to the Deputy on the other issue of the permanent school building for that Gaelscoil in Finglas. I again thank him for the opportunity to address this issue this morning. I will relay his comments to the Department and the Minister, Deputy Naughton.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 9.55 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10 a.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 9.55 a.m. and resumed at 10 a.m.*

*10 o'clock*

### **Flood Prevention: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- increased flooding is destroying property, causing hundreds of millions of euros of damage, and putting lives at risk;
- communities are waiting, in some cases for decades, for flood defences, protection and amelioration projects to be built;
- the delivery of flood defences is dangerously slow or grinding to a complete halt, with planning, licensing, permitting, tendering and the delivery of judicial reviews being slower in Ireland than in most of the European Union;
- flood forecasting has been available in the State for the last 10 years, but has not been made available to the public; and
- flood campaigners who have sought flood forecasts have had to contact county councils in order to get key life-saving information; and

calls on the Government to:

- immediately make flood forecasts available to the public through Met Éireann;
- introduce push notifications for flood warnings in local areas that have a significant threat of flooding;
- set up weather stations in mountain areas where the level of rainfall has a significant impact on river catchments;
- adequately staff planning departments in city and county councils;
- adequately staff An Coimisiún Pleanála;
- reform the planning process by ensuring that vexatious planning objections are no longer allowed, and objectors who do not have a geographic or a material interest in a project should not be allowed to object to a planning application for a flood defence or flood alleviation plan where life and livelihoods are under threat;
- take planning applications for flood defences and flood amelioration projects, where life and livelihoods are threatened, out of local authorities where blockages exist, and create a fast-tracked national planning process for these projects, and this will help flood defence schemes that affect numerous counties;
- simplify planning applications and ensure that only one standardised planning application is necessary for all planning, permitting, licensing and regulatory authorities;
- rebalance the planning process where habitat and Special Areas of Conservation planning conditions exist, in favour of protecting human life and livelihoods that are threatened by flooding;
- expedite public consultations where life and livelihoods are threatened by flooding;
- roll out nature-based solutions and compensate farmers upstream on river catchments to reduce flooding;
- end construction on flood plains;
- properly staff the court system, so that judicial reviews are dealt with in a speedy fashion;
- streamline the judicial review process by removing time-consuming procedures; and
- review the lack of financial supports for those who cannot get insurance for cars and other costly possessions with a view to supporting these families.

There is an anger building throughout many regions in the country at the lack of the ability of the Government to build flood defences. The dysfunction of this Government when it comes to the construction of infrastructure is putting life, limb and livelihood in severe danger across the Twenty-six Counties. It is not just about money. At the heart of this problem is gross Government incompetency to build infrastructure.

Much of the country was flooded last week. The Government cannot control the weather but it can control the forecasting that happens and the flood defences that are allowed to be put in place to protect communities. Two years ago, I asked the Minister for public expenditure for a timeframe for the delivery of flood schemes throughout the country. The Minister refused to give me a timeframe. Why? This Government is allergic to accountability and measurables. It does not want a situation whereby it can be held to account on this particular issue.

Let us consider some of the projects. Midleton was devastated by Storm Frank in 2015. Houses and businesses were trashed and lives were put at risk. That community was promised that flood defences would be built but nothing happened. Storm Babet hit in 2023. Some 600 homes and 300 businesses were damaged by the floods. The cost of those particular floods was €200 million. Storm Babet nearly took human life. So fast was the influx of water in some locations that people were caught in their houses and barely able to get out. Cars were floating down driveways and through estates.

It is now 2026. What happens in the likes of Midleton at the moment is that an elderly gentleman stays awake in the middle of the night to watch river levels to see if the banks are going to break so he can tell the families living next to the river that their lives are in danger. In 2026 in Midleton, a human water gauge is the difference between a person losing his or her life and not. That is an incredible situation. In 2026, a planning application has not even been put into Cork County Council for flood defences for Midleton. A planning application has not even been written.

Enniscorthy has been waiting for a project for 25 years. In 2014, €55 million was allocated to the flood defence scheme in Enniscorthy. The town was a lake last week. There have been 12 floods in those 25 years. A planning application has not even been written for that project. That is an absolute disgrace. There is a direct responsibility in the administration of this country for that problem.

In Clontarf, it has taken 30 years from concept to completion for flood defences. In Sandymount, it has taken 20 years from concept to completion for flood defences. Flood defences were promised in Galway in 2019 but there is no word of them happening before 2034. For all those projects, the timelines will only apply if everything works perfectly. We know there are plenty of slips between the cup and the lip in these particular projects.

In every single area of infrastructure, this Government is failing in delivery. We heard from Uisce Éireann at a committee recently. Its representatives said it is going to take until 2050 before the gaps in water infrastructure, which are holding back the building of houses, are filled. We know that right now, the M50 is a car park. People are paying €200 million per year in tolls on the M50 to sit in a car park. We know that the housing crisis is going into reverse due to the lack of an ability of the Government to build.

Planning, licensing, permitting, tendering and judicial reviews in this country are slower than anywhere else in the European Union. These are all areas for which the Government is responsible. These are all areas in the gift of the Government.

The area of flood forecasting is even more frustrating. I listened to the news last week about what happened in Rathfarnham. People said they simply did not know it was going to happen. The first they knew of it was when they were inundated with water coming through their front

doors at 5 a.m. In 2016, the Government created a flood defence weather forecasting system. It sounded fantastic. It looked at river catchment areas and river height levels. It looked at saturation levels on the ground. That information has been available since 2016 to everybody but the taxpayers who are paying for it. Incredibly, the information is not given to the general public. It is given to the local authorities and if you are that poor, unfortunate fellow who is the water gauge in Midleton, you have to go onto the county council's website on a regular basis to get the updates. Other countries provide push notifications. People get a text to tell them that serious rainfall is likely in the local area, there is a good chance the river will overflow and they should protect life and property. That does not happen in this country. It is not that a big investment is needed to make this service available to the public. It is not even that there is a technical problem with making the information available to the public. All that is needed is a bloody decision to be taken by the Government. It is incredible that the service is not available. The fact that we do not have weather stations on top of mountains in river catchment areas means we are dependent on radar to tell us the level of rain that is likely to fall in a particular area.

Aontú has put forward this motion. One of the big problems in the political system is that everybody is focused on the media cycle. Flooding is going to drop off the media cycle as soon as the weather gets better and everybody here will forget about flooding for the next two or three years until there is another massive flooding crisis. Everybody will then be shocked, annoyed and stressed. Let us not do that to the people. Let us put in the work now to ensure that in two years' time this crisis does not happen again.

We are looking for simple things. We want to make sure that those weather forecasts are made directly available to the people and that push notifications are put in place. We want weather stations in mountainous areas for river catchments. With regard to the planning aspects of the issue, we must ensure that Departments, county councils and An Coimisiún Pleanála are properly staffed. I know of builders whose applications for hundreds of houses have been in An Coimisiún Pleanála for 18 or 20 months. Decisions are yet to be made on those applications. The organisations that are making the planning decisions do not currently have the necessary staff. We need to reform the planning system to exclude vexatious planning objections. If you are building a slatted shed in Cork, people in Donegal can put in objections, despite the fact that they have no material or geographical interest. They can submit vexatious objections that can total the whole process forever. That needs to come to an end.

We also need to ensure that we have a balance in this situation. Right now, we have special areas of conservation, SACs, and habitat directives. They are important and fulfil a particular role. The pearl mussel in Enniscorthy is an important part of biodiversity. However, human life is also important. Livelihoods are important. We need to completely rebalance the hierarchy of priorities when it comes to planning applications in favour of human beings in the context of projects where life is under threat. That needs to happen.

We also need to simplify planning applications. I know of planning applications that need a van to be brought to the location. There are 30,000 pages in some planning applications. Surely something will go wrong in those planning applications that will allow for a judicial review. A smart solicitor only needs to find one line on one page that is out of kilter to be able to hold a judicial review to slow the whole process. I also know that there are three or four different varieties of planning application. One variety is required for licensing or a particular

permitting organisation. Another variety is required for the Department and another still may be required for the council.

We need one planning application to suit every single State body. An enormous layer of bureaucracy and red tape has been built up and we are drowning in it. Real people will drown in real floods as a result if it is not sorted out. It is so frustrating.

We need nature-based solutions and to help those suffering from the costs of this. A lot of the supports for floods and storms sound great when they are launched but after Storm Éowyn, people waited months and only got a third of the income they were promised at the start. Many people who own cars in flood areas do not have insurance. We see cars floating down the road but the Government will not support the costs arising from that. We need the State to step in in terms of those insurance policies for people who live on flood plains where the State provided the planning permission for the housing to be built. I hope the Government will support and implement this motion.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** I thank Aontú for tabling this motion. It is well put together, well thought out and well planned. I have mentioned these issues in the House on a number of occasions and brought them up when I was a member of Cork City Council regularly. Speaking of Cork City Council, 2009, the Minister of State may recall, is when Cork nearly drowned after the rivers burst their banks, waters in the dam had to be released and there was absolute destruction in the city. That was 17 years ago. We still have not seen flood defences built in the city. In Midleton, as my colleague just said, there has been no planning application made and we know the town floods regularly. Blackpool is in my constituency. Last month, I stood in a house on the Commons Road in Blackpool, which has been flooded on three separate occasions. The family, a son and his elderly mother, were just back in their property after a year, with the entire property done up and all restored, when the river burst its banks again due to heavy flooding. It was going to happen anyway and they are out of the house again for another two years. That is the reality people are living.

People tell me that when it rains, they check their gardens and cannot sleep at night because they are worried about what is going to happen. That is just in Blackpool. For businesses in Blackpool, an empty unit cannot be rented out at the moment because it is not possible to get insurance. No insurance company will cover that. Ballyvolane is higher up the hill. It flooded in 2009 and people there still cannot get insurance on their homes because there is no flood defence system there 17 years on. Imagine having the worry that either your house will go on fire, flood or something else will happen but you cannot get any insurance. That is the reality in my constituency in Cork and what people are going through day in, day out. There seems to be no let-up.

We have all spoken about planning and the need to change it but what has the Government done? Government Deputies talk the talk and wring their hands. They say lessons must be learned, we need to move faster, build houses and do this, that and the other but the Government is not doing it. It is talking about it but there is no legislation coming through this House. We are here day in, day out, hearing all these marvellous things we should be doing but they are not being done. For God's sake, would the rest of you all wake up and do your bloody job. I do not understand how it takes so long to get one thing done while people are suffering, lying

awake at night wondering if they are going to be out of their home for another 12 months. That is what they are being put through.

Part of this motion is very fitting. Cork City Council passed a motion unanimously last Monday night, tabled by Councillor Noel O'Flynn of Independent Ireland, asking for a system similar to the one in the Kingdom of Spain which provides a strong model, the ES-Alert system, to be put in place. I have witnessed the system myself. It is a fantastic model that works well, alerting people of the risk in their vicinity. It is very well managed and protects personal data as well. It is not a text alert but an entire system that alerts people by telephone. That needs to be done as well.

The comments made by certain Ministers about flood plains have left a lot of questions unanswered. That needs to be addressed in the House today. Local authorities, builders and people building houses on flood plains need to get information and have a proper structure of what the Minister is actually saying about building on flood plains. We need a timeline.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Common sense is not that common when it comes to Government policies. I will take the Minister of State on a small history lesson. Is he old enough to remember the Board of Works? I am. It went around and cleaned our waterways to allow for clear passage of water. Then, the OPW was set up. I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State as he is only in his position for the past 12 months, but coming from a rural background, he will have knowledge of and understand the need to keep rivers clear. We also have to protect wildlife but nobody is protecting the people. Both have to be protected.

When the OPW goes to a river now is not allowed touch the riverbed. It can touch the sides but people tell me the sides of the rivers are eroding and they are losing land. I visited a house a number of years ago in Abbeyfeale. The woman's husband has passed since. The back wall of their house was ready to fall into the river. They had to negotiate with Inland Fisheries Ireland and the OPW. All they wanted to do was divert the water a small bit so they could build up a retaining wall. The negotiations on protecting their home took two years.

The ports are dredged because silt builds up. Silt builds up everywhere, on every waterway. We want more houses to be built but the Government does not allow for any maintenance of gullies and waterways to take away the excess water. It could be synchronised by doing it on rotation, which would protect wildlife and households. The houses flooded at the moment have been flooded because of bad policy from the Government and bad maintenance because it will not maintain the rivers. The rivers have to be dredged to allow for the amount of water passing at the moment in order to protect houses. That is the reality. Until the Government gets the flood defences put in place to protect houses, it has to dredge in the interim. If a branch of a tree falls into a river, people have to go through a large amount of red tape to get removed. Newcastle West flooded, as did Abbeyfeale, Kilmallock and Dromcolliher, and that is only to mention a few. All of that was down to a lack of maintenance. The second they flooded, the machines were in and started cleaning the riverbeds straight away. Do it now. Put maintenance in place now to dredge the rivers to make sure water can run freely.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank Aontú for tabling this motion which important for the whole country. This has been a hobby horse of mine since I came into the Dáil in 2016 because I saw, in my short two years in the council, the damage in my constituency mainly caused by

blocked rivers. I genuinely want to have this addressed. What is blocking people from going in, perhaps putting in an application for a river to be cleaned out and for it to be cleaned out? It is so simple but it is made so difficult. It has destroyed houses and homes the length and breadth of the country. Nobody seems to want to tackle that issue.

I am not going to be critical of the Minister of State, Deputy Moran. He has the feet worn off himself going around visiting communities that were destroyed by flooding. That is what a Minister should do - talk to his people and businesses. I respect that but they need answers. The most mortifying thing I have found is that almost every year since I was elected, I have gone with a Minister around Bantry, a town that has been struck with floods severely, and sometimes I think I am only annoying businesses telling them we are very sorry and how terrible it is. That is not a solution. In Bantry, 42 years ago people told me they had to go into their premises and sit up on high stools because the water was tearing through the businesses. In 2025, the same thing happened. Nothing changed. I know the Minister was down in Ballylicky in 2017.

We were told about the pearl mussel and we know the pearl mussel is important. I heard a gentleman on RTÉ radio the other day talking about Enniscorthy.

He said the rivers are blocked. There is a pearl mussel on the side and it cannot be cleared. Where did the pearl mussel go when Enniscorthy flooded? It went across the field and was gone for ever. It is the same in Ballylicky. My brother, Councillor Danny Collins, dragged sandbags into houses there a few weeks ago to try to block the water. There is something wrong somewhere.

Where is the blockage, pardon the pun, in government that means legislation cannot be fast-tracked in here to make sure that rivers with problems can be cleaned out? One cannot fill a bath at home and keep running the water without expecting it to overflow and destroy the house. That is the most simple way to put it. We expect that in this country. We do not want to clean our rivers. Whether Enniscorthy, Innishannon, Ballylicky or Bantry, there is no policy to do that. That is the easiest thing to tackle.

Millions have been spent on flood relief, which we respect. Last week, I asked the Tánaiste to change that and I asked whether a policy can be brought forward to make sure that rivers are clean. He said he is looking into it. The people of Middleton, Enniscorthy or Ballylicky cannot be flooded one more time without anything being done.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins):** I thank all Deputies for the opportunity to speak on what is an important matter. At the outset, I acknowledge the upset that has been experienced by communities across the country, including mine, County Waterford, in recent weeks as a result of Storm Chandra.

The Government will not oppose the motion because we recognise the importance of the issue. We want to ensure that we can continue to protect against the risk of flooding through flood defence measures and reducing development in areas that are prone to flooding. We want to improve the response when it comes to communicating in and around severe weather events. We want to continue to provide sufficient relief and support to citizens and businesses which have been impacted by flood events.

As the House is no doubt aware, responsibility for floods, on behalf of Government, rests with the OPW. It is leading an ambitious national programme to protect against the risk of flooding and, to date, has invested some €580 million to complete 56 flood relief schemes which are protecting 13,580 properties nationwide, providing an economic benefit in damages avoided estimated to be in the region of €2 million. Most recently, in 2025 over €100 million was spent on delivering flood relief schemes. This is a record annual expenditure and is reflective of the progress that is being made in delivering schemes nationally. Obviously, we want to increase the level of investment in the years ahead.

Flood interventions include small-scale interventions under the minor works schemes which are delivered by local authorities. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, has increased the threshold for this from €750,000 to €2 million. There are also larger schemes that are generally carried out by the OPW, in conjunction with the relevant local authorities, generally in urban areas and designed and prioritised based on catchment flood risk assessment and management. An Coimisiún Pleanála generally deals with such applications due to their scale or need for environmental assessment, which is a requirement of EU law. Action is also being taken to complement this approach, as the Minister responsible for the OPW is proposing to assign the consent function for flood relief schemes progressed under the Arterial Drainage Act to An Coimisiún Pleanála.

Turning to action taken to manage development in areas that are at risk of flooding, which some Members have already cited, the planning system and flood risk management guidelines for planning authorities were developed in 2009 by the then Department of the environment in conjunction with the OPW. Under these guidelines, planning authorities should apply a sequential approach in aiming to avoid development in areas at risk of flooding through the zoning and development management process. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is currently working with the OPW to develop further guidance on the consideration of the potential impacts of climate change on flooding and flood risk as part of the planning and development management process and the application of these.

The assessment of individual planning applications remains to be carried out on a case-by-case basis by each planning authority and-or An Coimisiún Pleanála, in accordance with the requirements of the legislation, including the development plan for areas and the 2009 guidelines. The Office of the Planning Regulator has a statutory responsibility for the independent evaluation and assessment of local authority development plans and, where appropriate, may recommend to me, as Minister with responsibility for planning, to use my power to direct changes to a particular plan. My predecessors and I have issued 14 such directions regarding flood risk since 2021. There are, however, already significant urban areas in the country beside rivers and seas that are vulnerable to flooding for historic reasons, which is why a system for alerts to give early and adequate warnings is so important.

The OPW has responsibility for establishing flood risk management plans in Ireland and established and led the three-legged framework for flood monitoring, forecasting and warning, referred to as the national flood forecasting and warning service, NFFWS. As part of the first phase of the establishment of the NFFWS, a flood forecasting centre was established in Met Éireann and has provided flood forecasting information to emergency management stakeholders since early 2024. The flood warning leg was to be progressed during the later stages of the NFFWS.

In line with a strong record on the provision of open data, Met Éireann plans to increase the information it makes publicly available as the flood monitoring leg of the NFFWS develops. Met Éireann communicates expected flooding with the public through existing systems and the inclusion of flood information in public weather warnings and forecasts, including on its website, mobile apps and other media channels. In support of flood forecasting, Met Éireann has also significantly expanded its weather monitoring networks, upgrading weather radars and extensively expanding its weather prediction systems.

The flooding associated with Storm Chandra has demonstrated the limitations of a system in which weather warnings and emergency flood forecasting capability exist but are not underpinned by an official public warning function. Looking forward, the Office of Emergency Planning in the Department of Defence, as chair of the Government task force on emergency management subgroup, is developing a plan for the next stage of the NFFWS which will enable the implementation of comprehensive nationwide localised warning system.

It is important to point out for those who have been affected by flooding that there are a number of measures in place, including the emergency humanitarian flooding scheme, which has been operated by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment since 2018. The scheme provides a contribution of up to €20,000 for small businesses with up to 20 employees as well as community, voluntary and sporting bodies. A prerequisite of the scheme is that businesses or community and sporting bodies must have been unable to secure flood insurance through no fault of their own and to evidence their efforts if necessary. The scheme is typically opened after a severe flooding event and is administered on behalf of the Department by the Irish Red Cross. In response to extreme weather conditions in the wake of Storm Chandra in January, the Department opened an enhanced version of the scheme under which the maximum funding amount has been increased to €100,000 from €20,000 and businesses employing up to 50 people are now included.

Separately, the emergency response payment, formerly the humanitarian assistance scheme, provides financial support for people whose homes are damaged by flooding and severe weather events and have been unable to meet emergency costs for essential needs, household items and structural repairs. This support from the Department of Social Protection is a three-stage process. Stage 1 of the scheme addresses hardship in the immediate aftermath of an emergency event and provides emergency support payments to cover immediate and essential costs, including the purchase of food, clothing, bedding and essential personal items for immediate use. Stage 1 is not income tested.

Stage 2 involves the replacement of white goods, basic furniture items and other essential household items and generally applies after the event. Stage 3 covers the cost of essential structural repairs to a person's primary residence, such as plastering, dry lining, the relaying of floors, electrical rewiring and painting. The income limits for stages 2 and 3 of the scheme are €50,000 for a single person and €90,000 for a couple or single parent and €15,000 per dependent child. Reduced or tapered levels of support apply where household income is above these limits. The scheme can cover replacement and repair costs under stages 2 and 3, in circumstances where the household can demonstrate that it was unable to secure adequate insurance cover.

The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that we can protect more properties from flooding as a result of flood alleviation schemes, to improving our communications ahead

and during severe weather events and to ensuring that adequate support is provided to householders and businesses that are impacted by floods. As a Government, we acknowledge, as I said at the outset, the upset and the devastation that have been experienced by households across this country as a result of the most recent events, and we will work as a Government to ensure that we will continue to progress those measures. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, will refer to that in his closing.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Sorry, Chair. On a point of order-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Go raibh maith agat. No. A Theachta-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** There was not one thing in that ten-minute speech about cleaning the rivers or maintenance-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Nóiméad amháin. Is é an chéad ghrúpa eile-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** -----and not one thing about protection of people's homes.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** No. We are moving on. The next speaker is from the Independent Technical Group.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** You have to allow a point of order, Chair.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** You have to allow a point of order, Chair.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Deputy Paul Lawless has the floor.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** On a point of order, from the point of view of people's homes, there was not one thing in the ten minutes-----

**A Deputy:** That is not a point of order.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** People's houses are flooding because of the Minister of State. There is no maintenance.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Deputy O'Donoghue, sit down. Deputy Paul Lawless has the floor.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** Go raibh maith agat, Chair. I welcome the cross-party-----

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** Sorry, a Chathaoirligh. A statement was made there-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Oh, the Minister of State is-----

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** No.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Deputy Paul Lawless has the floor.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** Grandstanding for social media when there is a scheme for cleaning rivers. How dare you.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** There is only one speaker, Deputies.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** That is unfair. You know I announced the scheme. Making a statement just for social media is wrong.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Deputy Paul Lawless has the floor. A Aire, do not draw Deputy O'Donoghue on.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** It is sending out the wrong message to the public.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** If you will allow me to speak, Chair-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Stop. Deputy Paul Lawless has the floor.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** Go raibh maith agat, Chair. I welcome the cross-party support for this motion and the fact that the Government will not oppose it. However, I do want to say very clearly, it is one thing not to oppose this motion but it is another thing to implement fully the practical measures we have proposed that will have a significant impact in so many thousands of families and businesses right across this country. I urge the Minister of State to really get to grips with this and drive on with this legislation because it is clear there is cross-party support both in government, from Aontú and right across the Opposition.

In relation to Met Éireann, I have spoken to a number of families who are affected by the floods and they are so frustrated by the fact that there is information out there that is available to Met Éireann that is not getting to them. That information is really valuable. It is valuable in terms of preparing for a potential emergency evacuation. That is why it is in our motion, and it is unforgivable that this is currently the case. At the very least, we need to ensure that the families who are affected have all the information available to them.

My colleague Deputy Tóibín outlined the motion in clear detail earlier. I will address a point the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, made about the humanitarian assistance scheme, HAS. We had Storm Éowyn last year in Mayo and right across the west. It affected thousands of families, and many of those families came to me with the application form. The application

form clearly stated what it would cover, and the rejection letters then outlined the very things that it was set out to cover and the letters stated what is not covered. For example, food and clothing were two items specifically mentioned on the application form and specifically mentioned in the rejection letter as well. That is so frustrating for families who have been so badly affected. They apply for something the Government advertises only to receive a rejection letter on the basis of the criteria it has set out. That needs to be addressed. This is a serious issue in relation to the humanitarian assistance scheme.

When flooding happens in the spring and the autumn, farmers are desperately affected as well in terms of bringing in livestock. That needs to be looked at. We need to assist them in terms of compensation for additional fodder and housing, etc.

The flood defence system and the planning system for flood defences are incredibly bureaucratic, and that red tape needs to be removed. There are people who can no longer wait for a planning system that takes ten or 20 years in some cases. That is wrong. The entire House supports this motion, and Government members themselves have outlined this morning that they support it. I ask them to get on with passing the legislation to ensure that the bottlenecks are removed. We have been very clear on what needs to happen, and there is no reason for the Minister of State to preside over additional delays.

I welcome the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Boxer Moran, over recent weeks, and it is very clear that he is listening to the people in this time of crisis. I ask him to continue to listen to the people across this country. In Charlestown, in Mayo, there is a river that has almost burst its banks. These families are seeking for that river to be cleaned, etc., and it is so frustrating that still has not happened and we are almost a year after some homes and businesses being flooded. The people on the ground know best, and a clear prioritisation needs to be given to human beings, their families, their businesses and their homes in relation to this. Yes, we need to protect the environment and we need to protect the ecosystem in our rivers, but families and their homes must be protected as well, and in that hierarchy of prioritisation I believe human beings have fallen off the cliff. I ask the Minister of State to listen to families and the people most affected and ensure that human beings and families are prioritised as well.

In relation to the recent Labour Party proposal regarding situations where, for example, local authorities purchase equipment for flooding, etc., I ask that they be compensated. I am sorry to have gone over my time.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** Looking at the bigger picture, in 30 years' time, in 2056, it is estimated that the sea level will have risen by up to half a metre, so we are talking about a lot of land along the coast that will be decimated no matter what we do, no matter how many Y-shaped concrete structures we put in. In terms of being strategic with that climate change risk, we have to look at certain areas that will have to be lost to the sea, like they have done on the east coast of Great Britain, and strategically retreat from certain areas. We have to say to people, "We are going to pay for you to have a brand-new insulated house but a little further back." Then we have to focus on the areas we can actually protect rather than trying to fight the indefensible. When you look at the likes of Dublin, from a housing perspective, as I have said before, but equally from a flood perspective, we need to start to go up and we need to start building houses on stilts. We should look at what is happening in the Netherlands and plan for future inundations in areas of high population density.

At the same time, one-in-a-hundred-year floods are now one-in-20-year floods, and with the rainfall affecting a lot of the rivers around our country, we will have the same level of inundation. In my constituency we have had several unanticipated floods over the past two decades and it will only get worse. That is because of policy. I note there is a €1.3 billion plan to look at flooding around the country and at alleviation. One of the points is about rewilding and replanting, but I would like to see a little more on that. We have decimated our native forests. Where we have replanted trees we have put in conifers. We are talking about Irish beef being better than Brazilian beef and getting into this big argument. Personally, I believe that if we are polluting the rivers by getting a nitrates derogation to be exporting beef, we are still on the wrong side. We have got rid of a lot of land that used to be a natural floodplain to use it for grazing to produce inefficient beef when we do very little from the tillage end.

On the planning side of things, we are not looking seriously enough at green roofs on buildings in terms of soakage. As it stands, we have seen communities around the country - the Celtic tiger was the height of it, but it still happens, including in my constituency - such as the Clonburris SDZ, where, when I was a councillor, we tried to put 442 houses away from a floodplain and put in GAA pitches, which would have served for six to nine months of the year, then building higher at a train station. Unfortunately, certain councillors voted against us on that, so now we are adding to the amount of water going into the River Griffeen and we will see flood instances down the road again.

I might be digressing but, even though it is kind of counter-intuitive, we need to look at a strategy for all-weather pitches because more and more of the GAA, rugby and soccer pitches are being waterlogged. We need to have some sort of water storage and proper drainage for grass pitches and all-weather pitches in our communities. However, that is a separate debate.

I do not believe that, as a country, we are taking the issue of future flooding seriously enough. It is all about crisis management and putting into place plans that were supposed to be in place 20 years ago and we are looking at it on a community-by-community basis. We are saying Midleton and we are saying Fermoy. That is all welcome and they all need the flood alleviation but we are not looking at the long-term picture that we are going to be fighting crisis flooding for the next couple of centuries. We must look at retrenchment. We have to look at where we are building and where we should not build. We are not looking at that enough. We should be rewilding, planting more trees, which create the soakage, and allowing natural river plains to spread out. We will lose a lot of acreage but we may have a more sustainable way of life for the country going forward. Otherwise, we are going to be spending multiple billions of euro to deal with sticking plasters when we should be looking at the root cause and trying to tackle it as quickly and as early as possible.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan):** Before we move on to the next speaker, I welcome on behalf of Senator Michael Kennelly students from the Presentation Secondary School in Listowel, County Kerry, and their teachers Norma Dowling and Louise McAuliffe. They are all very welcome today and I hope they have a wonderful day in Leinster House.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I, too, welcome the school community from the convent in Listowel. It is entirely appropriate that there is a school delegation here from the town of Listowel because anyone in this House will remember the flooding that took place two or three weeks before the

election of November 2024. Unfortunately, while work has been done in Listowel, which the Minister visited recently, where banks have put in, we remember what happened in Killacrim and off the Bridge Road. However, the long-term plan, which we recently met with Kerry County Council about, has not been put in place to address the issue of flooding and forestry upriver. The forestry is not only causing a biodiversity crisis and cleaning out the rivers literally and metaphorically with the absence of brown trout in the rivers up around the Knocknagoshel area, the Lyracrumpane area, the River Awbeg and other tributaries of the River Feale. The water that is going in there has not been addressed and there is no long-term plan in place.

Over the past few weeks other communities around the country have been devastated and homes have been destroyed, but the fallout have not been unforeseeable or unavoidable. It exposes how unprepared this Government has been. Flooding is not simply a matter of heavy rain; it is years of underinvestment, inadequate infrastructure and lack of long-term planning. Has river restoration been taken into account? No. Nature-based solution like they have in the Netherlands and Germany or what they have done in Yorkshire have not been taken into account. Has there been much investment in wetlands, afforestation plans or peatland restoration? No. We await the long-term plan for the Listowel area. Kerry County Council has told us that it has not been dealt with yet. No consideration has been given to upland tributaries and rivers. We still do not have a national flood warning system in place. This is an outrageous oversight in the face of worsening storms because they are going to continue. Our policy seems to have been more payments and then blaming judicial reviews and the pearl mussels. That is not good enough.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** The ongoing and very real impact on the community in Passage East in County Waterford and the serious shortcomings in response to recent flooding events must be to the forefront of the Minister's mind having visited there last weekend. My colleagues, Councillor Pat Fitzgerald and Deputy David Cullinane, and many residents have raised the need for an effective early warning system with timely and accurate information. This must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Probably the most frustrating issue that locals raise is the long-standing underinvestment in storm water and drainage infrastructure in Passage East. Without significant and sustained investment, flooding will remain a recurring threat. In west Waterford and particularly in Tallow, Councillor Donnchadh Mulcahy and I have consistently raised the need for funding and delivery of the Tallow flood relief system where existing systems have failed residents. We welcome the start of a detailed flood investigation of West Street and the River Bride in Tallow and the OPW approval of funding under the minor flood mitigation works scheme last year. However, it has taken far too long to get to that point.

I know the Minister will shortly receive advanced and updated flood relief plans for Passage East, Tallow and other parts of County Waterford. It is time to now translate those plans into action, with funding allocated and clear timelines put in place, because communities like Passage East and Tallow cannot continue to live with the fear of repeated flooding. We need those proper early warning systems, effective emergency responses and, crucially, that much-needed and long-awaited investment in flood relief measures that will protect homes and businesses.

Finally, I want to point out the consistent lack of funding for road services and local authorities. It is causing havoc for our regional and local road networks. That is put in sharp relief when we see the emergence of potholes after adverse weather conditions. Areas that are not experiencing the worst cases of flooding are seeing spot flooding and increased amounts of surface water. The roads right across the State and right across County Waterford are in rag order. It is something that needs to be addressed.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** To put it lightly, it would be fair to say we had serious rains and serious flooding. There are issues that need to be dealt with in north Louth. In fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, he was in Blackrock recently. We need to make sure that catchment-based flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, is driven ahead. For Dundalk and Blackrock south we are only talking about the application going in probably around June 2027. However, we need to make sure there are no hold-ups and that any short-term mitigations can be introduced.

The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy McGreehan, will well know the issues that have happened and constantly happen in north County Louth, particularly out by the Cooley Peninsula out to the Border. There is a considerable amount of works that should and can be done. Councillor Antóin Watters is one of many who brought up these issues with me and others.

When I talk about Dundalk, I can talk about the Ardee Road and the fact we have issues that are caused by the River Blackwater. We have finally received promises to clean the River Blackwater and The Ramparts. We have seen the introduction of pumps. We need to ensure that Louth County Council has access to them always, uses tankers and that we do the best we can in the disaster scenario.

I am talking about Bay Estate, where I live, Cluan Enda, Greenwood Drive, Blackwater Court, Ashbrook or basically anywhere around Red Barns Road and St. Alphonsus Road. We have those issues of high tides and huge rains. However, at this point in time the reason we have flooding there is that the Uisce Éireann infrastructure is not up to scratch. I refer to the issue with CFRAM and the issue with the Coes Road pumping station, where everything from WuXi Biologics comes right through. It is a joint sewage and storm water facility. The fact is it is not going to be upgraded completely. Works will start in about 2027 but will not finish until 2029 or 2030, according to the council. Even worse, the wastewater treatment plant is not due to be upgraded until 2033. There is no capacity and we are lucky we did not have hundreds of houses flooded.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan):** Thank you, Deputy. Your time is up, even though I agree with you. I call on Deputy Mythen.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** My hometown of Enniscorthy is in a state of devastation. The people on Island Road on the quays of the River Slaney have experienced awful destruction and major damage to their homes and businesses. This is not the first time; it has happened 16 times since 2000. How can this be allowed to go on for decades? The town needs help and it needs it now. I know the Minister and the Taoiseach visited the town, and I thank the Minister for that, but people are sick to their stomach with statements, promises and platitudes. Granted,

remedial works have been promised and plans are being prepared, but why does it take a major catastrophe for anything to happen in this country?

Under the Arterial Drainage Act 1945, the Minister has the legal authority to approve a flood relief scheme, even if planning permission was previously refused, provided environmental safeguards are met. An example of this only happened this week with the Government willing to legislate to override planning constraints at Dublin Airport. If the Government can intervene using the powers it already has, then it can intervene in the planning for the flood relief scheme in Enniscorthy, County Wexford. In fact, it is a legal obligation under the 1945 Act to protect communities once a workable environmental compliance scheme is ready. Surely, the freshwater pearl mussel that was the main issue with the scheme in the first place can be translocated, just like the Dublin Bay oyster.

I am pleading with the Minister to act now. Under section 7 of the Arterial Drainage Act, he can approve flood relief works independently of the planning system. It is time to deliver for the people of Wexford and my hometown of Enniscorthy. They have had enough. They have been left behind, but no more. In the past, the political will dissipated as soon as the water subsided. This time, the people will rise up and be counted. They will not accept another decade of fear and panic every time there is heavy rainfall. I again ask that the Minister use his power to expedite the flood relief system for the proud and beautiful town of Enniscorthy.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** Nobody can stop a storm but the Government can and must prevent the predictable damage. The repeated extreme flooding events we have witnessed were not all inevitable but they were worsened by delay, underinvestment and a lack of urgency. Communities have repeatedly shown extraordinary levels of resilience but that is not a substitute for investment. People deserve more than hand-wringing, sympathy and sandbags. They deserve infrastructure and ongoing maintenance that safeguards their homes, farms and businesses. They deserve the Government acting before disaster strikes and not after with emergency payments. Yes, they are necessary but they are not, in and of themselves, a flood policy. They are a response after devastation and not protection beforehand.

This is not just about those vital flood defences. There is a serious element to this around the restoration and maintenance of our riverways, public safety and fairness because what was once exceptional is now too often routine. The science has been very clear for a long number of years. Warnings were repeatedly put out there, and yet too many communities are enduring a relentless cycle of flooding, fear and neglect. Homes have been destroyed, farms battered and small businesses pushed to the brink, and with insurance withdrawn.

Families are still told to wait for studies, plans and processes that all move at glacial speed. This represents a profound disconnect from the reality of the urgency that exists on the ground. Yes, flood relief and prevention schemes are complex, yet oversight matters. The excessive timeline from planning to procurement to completion is simply unacceptable. Communities cannot remain trapped behind red tape while risks escalate year after year. Those communities need urgency. We need delivery. We need long-term investment in flood mitigation and climate adaptation. Above all, though, we need a Government that treats flooding not as an occasional emergency but with the same level of priority as communities feel when they watch in horror and fear, time and again, as the water levels rise, destroying everything they have worked for.

**Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin:** People in Bunclogh, Enniscorthy, Aughrim and Arklow are still trying to pick up their lives after the recent floods. The cameras have gone, the spotlight has moved on, and the Minister and the Taoiseach have arrived to tell the people the money is there, these things take time and there is no magic wand.

I think people in Wicklow-Wexford know that. They have been waiting for decades while the Government did nothing. Little attention has been paid to Bunclogh. Enniscorthy has flooded 16 times since 2001, and going back as far as 1924. Arklow has had six major floods since 2000. The Arklow flood relief scheme has been talked about for four decades, so when the Taoiseach says these things take time, it really infuriates people. The Arklow scheme was originally supposed to cost €28 million but it is now estimated to be €57 million after years of delays and redesigns. We heard from the chair of the Committee of Public Accounts, Wicklow TD, John Brady, that millions of euro allocated for the national flood forecasting warning service were handed back, with €13.5 million handed back out of €19 million. That is absolutely crazy. Yet the Minister, Deputy Browne, was quick to point the finger of blame last week regarding where this money could have been invested in proper forecasting and warning systems. Deputy Brady also brought in the Flood Insurance Bill 2021. This Bill needs to be pushed immediately.

Flood relief schemes are planned for Arklow, Aughrim and Enniscorthy but there is little or nothing for Bunclogh. These schemes need to be moved on and progressed straightaway. People in Wicklow-Wexford are hoping and praying they will not have more storms while the Government dithers and has photo ops but takes little meaningful action. I ask the Government to please get on with these schemes now because people cannot wait any longer.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I am glad to have the opportunity to speak about flooding today. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, will understand because he has been to County Mayo many times himself. I welcome that, after ten years, the Crossmolina scheme is going to be done. I ask that that project be expedited as quickly as possible as well as the project in Ballina. Many other smaller schemes, though, need to be done in the county, not least in Charlestown and other places.

I would ask that there is a better join-up between the OPW and the county council. What has happened is that county council outdoor staff have been reduced dramatically over the years. This is taking its toll now and we are seeing the results of it in many places where drains are not cleared and things are not done that would previously have been done by the county council staff. We have situations where homes and businesses are in danger of being flooded or have already been flooded. The Minister of State knows how flooding threats delay growth and development in small towns.

I want to bring up with the Minister of State the River Carrownisky and the problems there. They are easily fixable in terms of the bridge that needs to be done. The situation has gone on for years. All the plans and everything for it have been done. I am asking that the bridge, which is serving the communities on each side of the river, be reinstated and fixed. We are talking about a very small amount of money. It can be done with agencies working together, with Mayo County Council and tourism bodies. What is required here is that the agencies work together and not in silos to get solutions to these projects so people can get on with their lives

and we can get what needs to be done, done. An awful lot of money is wasted in this country. It would be very well spent in County Mayo in dealing with some of these projects.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** In County Kilkenny, communities like Inistioge, Thomastown, Callan and Graiguenamanagh endured severe flooding during the recent extreme weather. It will take weeks to clear the damage and who knows how long to repair the destruction inflicted on local roads. This flooding has hit local families and businesses the hardest. It is very hard to tell how many of these businesses and restaurants will be able to recover from this devastation. What is certain is that a very challenging period lies ahead. In Inistioge, the pitch at the GAA club was submerged under 6 ft. of water. In Thomastown, heavy rainfall is causing part of the quay to collapse and over time it is slowly being pulled into the river. In Graiguenamanagh, it is expected that flood defence works will take nine years. How is that acceptable?

In Carlow, the banks of the River Barrow overflowed causing stress and unnecessary damage throughout the area. Plans for dredging have been held up by the national planning body. These delays are having a devastating impact on families along the River Barrow. These essential maintenance works must be made a priority before further heavy rain causes the river to overflow its banks again. This rain and the resulting flooding have devastated our local roads. The roads in south Kilkenny are particularly bad. At a local meeting the other evening, the community voiced its frustration at the lack of progress. It is now estimated that the cost to repair the roads will be around €7 million, a massive sum for Carlow County Council. All of these people pay their taxes and all of them pay road tax, yet they see very little coming back to resurface our rural roads. We need central government to step in and provide this much-needed support to the council. The Government has announced over €100 million for flood defence works. This cannot be like so many other Government announcements where the funding has been left sitting idle for years. The manpower is there. The local councils need the funding and they need it now.

**Deputy Joanna Byrne:** This Government treats flood prevention schemes like something that is topical or seasonal. Every year when there is flooding, as there always is, the Government parties make statements on how they are doing everything they can and make positive statements about how they are definitely tackling the flooding problem this time but, unfortunately, it does not accelerate works, it does not cut down on the bureaucracy and it does not cut down on the timelines for delivery. Its members will be making the same speeches they will make next year, or later on this year when there is more flooding around the State, and while they are doing this, the local representatives are left to warn their constituents to avoid certain areas due to more flooding. While those speeches are being made, the residents of towns and villages that have suffered flood damage multiple times will be wondering what they have to do to see some action and results. These are the residents who cannot get their homes, businesses or possessions insured anymore and they are the ones left to shoulder the costs year on year.

There are 94 flood relief schemes described as ongoing, 68 schemes have not even reached the planning stage and 54 are not even under active consideration. The five-stage process for a flood prevention scheme just takes far too long. In some areas, it is taking decades but in most places it is taking 12 to 15 years. An immediate change could be made to the stage two

planning process or public exhibition confirmation, which can take up to two years. Local authority staff are well able to plan a flood defence in an area where they have been implementing emergency measures year on year. This is obviously not a matter of money as the Government has a budget surplus. The fact is that it has under-resourced local authorities, there are not adequate staff in An Coimisiún Pleanála and it has allowed construction on floodplains. The Government has allowed the OPW to become unaccountable. It needs to maintain the local rivers and the OPW must put dredging plans in place where needed.

This is the story the length and breadth of the country as we have been hearing this morning.

*11 o'clock*

The fact is, as is the lived reality for people in my home area, that Mornington, Baltray and Termonfeckin will flood again. Until flood schemes and mitigation works are completed, this is the sad reality they must live with. We need to act now. Let us not be obliged to have this conversation again this time next year.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I thank the Minister of State for visiting Passage East on Sunday last. He met with the local authority and with residents whose homes were affected by flood damage. He would have heard at first hand that what those who were affected by the floods in Passage East want is less talk and more action. There were concerns raised - rightly so - by residents in regard to the response from Waterford City and County Council. They were not pointing the finger of blame at individual staff members. They acknowledged that the staff do a very difficult job in difficult circumstances, but it was acknowledged, even by the CEO of the council, that there have to be learnings. There were failings, and we have to get better at supporting communities during floods.

Having visited Passage East before the Minister of State went there, it was obvious that multiple problems have been exposed. It is not just one problem; the whole system is antiquated. It is not just from the brook where, obviously, if you have very heavy rain and a high tide, a great deal of water is going to flow downhill. The water brings with it stones and other debris that block the system. The culvert there is not fit for purpose. The drainage system comprises old clay pipes. The entire system is antiquated. What happens is that everything goes wrong when there is a high tide and heavy flooding. Homes are damaged as a result. There is a lot of work to be done in the village.

There are five schemes that are at an advanced stage in Waterford. All five need to be developed, including the one in Tallow. My colleague Councillor Donnchadh Mulcahy has raised this matter consistently at council level. The project relating to Tallow is important and needs to be delivered. All five projects are at an advanced stage and they need to be properly supported, funded and delivered, once and for all. I hope that will be the case in the aftermath of the Minister of State's visit.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** I thank the Ministers of State for being here. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, in particular for his visits to Wexford to view the devastation, particularly in Enniscorthy. I met him there last April when we sought to devise a new plan after the rejection, on environmental grounds, of the-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan):** Apologies, but is the Deputy moving his amendment?

**Deputy George Lawlor:** I am sorry. I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "with a view to supporting these families":

";

further notes that the increase in storm severity and recent floods are the result of accelerating climate change; and

further calls on the Government to:

- resource local authorities to hire more general operatives to ensure staff are in place to maintain and clear drains, culverts and ditches, and respond quickly to weather events;

- provide grants to local authorities to purchase emergency flood prevention equipment like Aqua Dams, and deploy strategic local reserves of sandbags to at-risk communities;

- introduce a national flood warning system and overhaul our emergency preparedness and response systems, implementing best practise from international comparators;

- place the Emergency Humanitarian Flooding Scheme for businesses and community organisations on a permanent statutory footing, as was committed to in 2023, after flooding in north Louth;

- introduce a national Flood Re scheme, modelled on the United Kingdom system, to provide re-insurance to the increasing number of homes and businesses denied coverage even when flood defences are in place; and

- reform the Office of Public Works, to give it a stronger statutory role in climate mitigation and flood prevention works."

The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, and I met in Enniscorthy last April to outline, in conjunction with the Office of Public Works, OPW, the plans for a new application for a flood relief scheme that is so badly needed by the people of Enniscorthy. For decades, this town has suffered. I will not say that it has been affected on an annual basis, but it has been affected regularly. I know Joe Berney of Berney Saddlery Limited, which is located on the quay in Enniscorthy and which has been flooded 16 times. That is devastating.

There is one matter I would like to raise. Perhaps the Minister of State could investigate it. Why are all the State-operated water level and tide gauges not on the same portal? *WaterLevel.ie* is operated by the OPW and the Marine Institute operates its real-time observations in respect of tidal issues. This type of siloed thinking, where the OPW looks after inland areas and the Marine Institute looks after the sea, is a perfect example of how we need to bring this together. Enniscorthy is tidal up as far as the bridge from Wexford Harbour, but then the River Slaney comes into it. Two different agencies appear to be operating the portals

relating to tide levels and gauges. That is something we need to investigate, particularly in a place like Enniscorthy, which is essentially covered by both.

Enniscorthy was the focal point of the flooding in Wexford. We all saw the devastation there but we also, as the Minister of State knows, saw devastation in Bunclody, where many houses were flooded, Bridgetown, which flooded in the past and was flooded again, and Kilmore and Our Lady's Island, places that have seen flooding. It is 60 years since Bunclody was flooded. Bridgetown was flooded only a few years ago. It was badly flooded on Christmas Day, which brought devastation. We saw Our Lady's Island lake overflow this on this occasion. In Kilmore, some local businesses suffered badly as a result of the flooding.

Our amendment calls for extra resources to be given to local authorities to hire additional general operatives in order to ensure that staff are in place to maintain and clear drains, culverts and ditches and respond quickly to weather events. I have spoken to the Minister of State about this and about providing grants to local authorities to purchase the emergency flood protection equipment such as the aqua dams. Thankfully, following the Minister of State's intervention, Westmeath County Council supplied an aqua dam to Enniscorthy. These should be available in every town and village and operated by the fire service on behalf of local authorities. They could be stored in local authority depots and deployed very quickly when there is a threat of flooding. We have enough instrumentation and information at this point to ensure that we have foreknowledge of when flooding is likely to happen. We need these interim measures.

We absolutely need a permanent solution for Enniscorthy but, for the other areas, we need to have interim or mitigation measures to allow people to be protected from flood waters. In Wexford town, we are affected by coastal flooding. The aqua barriers or dams to which I refer are readily available. One tonne sandbags and other types of sandbags are made available long in advance of any flooding arriving. Wexford County Council did its best, and nothing could have prevented the devastation that happened in Enniscorthy, even if we had received word in advance. We need to look at our warning systems. In Enniscorthy, where the flow of water from the River Slaney was devastating, there are people who are seasoned when it comes to their properties being flooded and who could have tried to get some of their equipment, furnishings, etc., to higher ground. Instead, they were battling against the tide as they strove to save some of their property.

This has been going on for far too long, as we know, but now is not the time to be battling each other. We need to work together and offer a unified front at local authority and at Government level in order to ensure that whatever measures are necessary are taken to stop this type of devastation, which happens almost on an annual basis in places in my county, from happening once and for all.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** I thank Deputies Tóibín and Lawless for tabling this motion. The Labour Party has submitted an amendment which, we hope, will be an effort to strengthen the motion. As Deputy Lawlor said, however, this is something we all need to work together on. Like Deputy Lawlor's constituency, my constituency of Dublin South-West was hit really hard by the floods that happened in the wake of Storm Chandra, particularly Rathfarnham and parts of the Ballycullen area. I thank the Minister of State for coming to visit the parts of Rathfarnham near the River Dodder. There was significant damage in Woodside and places like that. Councillor Paddy Cosgrave and I have been working closely with local businesses

and residents in the aftermath. I feel we were able to give people some practical help over the past few weeks in being a link between residents, businesses and the council and in giving a little advice about the supports that are available and that we have seen increase. Credit goes to the Minister, Deputy Burke, regarding the business support scheme.

Households in areas like Grange Park, Woodside and Nutgrove Avenue were badly affected by the flooding. Thousands of euro worth of damage has been done to people's homes and businesses. Cars have been written off. Water came up through the floorboards in houses. We are not sure about the structural damage that has been done as a result of this. There will be medium- to long-term effects, and I am glad to see the Government has some schemes in place in relation to those. Of course, they are only effective if you do not already have insurance. Obviously, there are lots of households which do not have insurance. I will get to that in a moment.

Part of the Labour Party's amendment involves putting the support schemes - the business one as well as those for affected community organisations - on a statutory footing in order that they do not require Government approval to kick in every time there is an incident of localised flooding. When pressed by my colleague Deputy Ged Nash on this matter in the aftermath of flooding in north Louth in 2023, the previous Government stated that this statutory scheme would be a priority but it still has not been delivered. If the Government wants to project a sense of urgency in dealing with issues around flooding, then this must be done immediately.

Our amendment also calls for the introduction of a flood insurance scheme modelled after the successful Flood Re scheme in the UK, which provides cover for households and businesses that are increasingly denied coverage, even when flood defences are in place near them. Grange Park in Rathfarnham previously experienced similar levels of flooding around 20 years ago. From speaking to residents in the area, I am aware that it has been a nightmare for them to get flood insurance ever since, even though there is a flood alleviation scheme being put in place right beside them.

One in 20 buildings in Ireland has limited access to flood insurance. That is a pretty incredible statistic.

I know the Minister of State has asked his officials to examine the Flood Re scheme. We very much welcome that and we would like to see some progress on it.

We do need to get our act together on flood defences. The Labour Party amendment notes the changing weather patterns we are seeing, with more rain, more frequent and severe storms and more flooding and all this is the result of climate change. We need to be clear about that. I am sure that acknowledgement was not purposely omitted from the original motion but it is really important for us that that acknowledgment that this is as a result of climate change is put front and centre here.

On the front page of today's *Irish Examiner* Maynooth University's Professor Peter Thorne is explicit that this is going to get worse as a result of climate change and we are miles behind in mitigation measures like flood defences. Progress has been too slow. The OPW in my area commenced construction on the Whitechurch Stream flood alleviation scheme in Rathfarnham three years ago. It has been beset with what look like numerous preventable delays, the consequences of which were realised in Grange Park just two weeks ago and the disruption from which has been suffered by residents on the road beside Whitechurch Stream in estates

like St. Gatiens Court, Willbrook and Tara Hill for the last three years. It can be very convenient for the Government and local authorities to blame judicial reviews and scapegoat environmental concerns about these schemes as a sole reason for the delays to the flood schemes being constructed. I was dismayed to hear Ministers essentially make virtue last week of setting aside environmental concerns to expedite flood alleviation schemes. God knows our waterways are polluted enough already and are in such a bad state - Lady's Island lake, Lough Neagh and the River Blackwater - without the Government greenlighting further destruction of precious and quickly depleting biodiversity and wildlife habitat. We need to be looking upstream at nature-based solutions rather than just this concrete-first approach. How can we possibly still be building on flood plains? It defies logic.

The issue for me and for the Labour Party is that it lies in the proper resourcing of our planning authorities and the courts to deal quickly with the applications for these schemes, and appeals when they arise, and to properly resource our local authorities and the OPW when it comes to the actual construction of the schemes so that they do not take years to complete.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** This motion has some very positive aspects. It is important to highlight the issue of flooding and its impacts on people across this country. It has impacted people in so many different ways and our hearts go out to all those who are dealing with the fallout from it.

While we cannot predict whether it is going to rain tomorrow or the next day what we do know is that climate change is happening right now. We also know that we can prevent further changes in climate change. We also know we lack infrastructure investment in this country. In regard to infrastructure, this Government acts as if literally it was the weather to blame for the flooding and the failures. Let us be straight and honest. The Government's Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan highlights that Ireland's infrastructure gap has consistently for decades been about 25% below the European average. This is not a problem that emerged overnight. This comes from a failure of successive Governments led by Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael and the Irish State to actually take a social democratic approach to investment in public services, public infrastructure and, in particular, in local government.

Local government has been treated like an afterthought. Its capacity has been gutted. For 40 years we have had broadly neoliberal policies which have essentially outsourced the key responsibilities of local government and not invested in our public capacity and we wonder why we have floods, major traffic problems, lack of investment in our healthcare and homelessness. It is because of policy that has not prioritised public services.

Climate change is happening. It is absolutely astounding to me that it is like the Government has turned around and done a Trump on it, saying, "We are now ignoring the science. We actually do not even care about it." The all-party Oireachtas committee has identified 30 barriers to the Government meeting its targets. The Government has effectively accepted we will not meet our targets and it is almost celebrating it. I cannot get my head around this. It is jeopardising the lives of future generations and quality of life and for what? Is it to make concessions to independents? Is it to be seen as anti-green? It is so narrow, short term and populist in the worst form. We are heading towards climate catastrophe and this Government is ripping up the targets and has no intention whatever to getting near to meeting them so as to be seen as being politically populist and standing up for whoever it is saying is being left

behind. All you are going to see is worsening flooding and worsening weather. We need proper investment in our infrastructure, to accept the science and to meet our climate targets. Unfortunately, the people in this country are going to lose because of the Government's shortsightedness, its political populism and its failure to take a social democratic approach which recognises the state has to invest in delivering infrastructure on a very significant level beyond what we are doing right now.

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** It is increasingly baffling how utterly in limbo many east Cork residents are left over two years on from Storm Babet. I want to acknowledge the recent planning approval for a scheme that will protect Tir Cluain estate and some nearby properties in Midleton. I am conscious that the Midleton flood relief scheme is large-scale and very complex and is slowed down by the degree of engagement with landowners that it requires. As much as it should have been completed many years ago, we cannot turn the clock back on that political failure - we are where we are now – but what is really perplexing is the degree of detachment of the Minister of State's Department from the villages that were also flooded in October 2023, namely, Mogeely, Rathcormac, Castlemartyr, Killeagh, Ladysbridge and Whitegate. There was a recent announcement that €108,000 was allocated to Whitegate but this was not for any actual flood works. It was to appoint a specialist to survey the possibility of flood works. How did it take almost two-and-a-half years since Storm Babet to make that appointment? In reply to parliamentary questions, the Minister of State has said there is a shortage of expertise in the country to help direct so-called tranche II projects. What I would like to know is how much efforts has the Minister of State engaged in to hire experts from abroad? All these villages remain in limbo and it is not acceptable.

In August 2024 two experts were commissioned by Cork County Council to assess the potential for land use or nature-based solutions upstream from Midleton. We know these measures have been very successful in settlements such as Pickering in Yorkshire. Their survey did not extend to Mogeely but my understanding is that the experts viewed Mogeely as a potential area where natural flood defences could be deployed relatively quickly at low financial cost and without the need for planning permission. There was buy-in from the local landowner there and a substantial number of houses could have benefitted. The council has, for some unknown reason, kept the nature-based report under wraps since. I requested it last August and did not receive it. It was not even released to me following a freedom of information request in October last year. Nobody is suggesting nature-based solutions are a silver bullet but they are effective with more frequent low-intensity floods and they are an important part of the overall approach.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan):** Thank you Deputy. I call Deputy Farrelly.

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** I want to ask the Minister of State why we are not maximising the potential for nature-based solutions along with engineering methods.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** The ways by which successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil governments have handled flooding over the past ten years is an example of gross incompetence. In March 2025, I put a parliamentary question to the Minister for housing - it

is a shame he has left the Chamber; he has abandoned ship on this issue - asking about the national flood forecasting and warning service. I asked, in particular, why this information was not being released publicly. The service was set up in 2016. Ten years later, we still have no public information about forecasting and warnings. I was told stage 1 was being managed by the OPW and that the data was not mature enough to provide warnings for locations to the public. We asked for an update just last week. The reply from the Department of housing was there was 48 hours left. It took numerous attempts from officials in this House and from our office just to get a response and what we learned was nothing new. We have been trying to establish this for ten years and we still do not have publicly available forecasting data.

In Kildare last week we were told to brace ourselves because areas of Newbridge and Clane could be flooded due to necessary alleviation procedures at the Pollaphuca dam. The ESB was able to brief public representatives and communities but there is a bigger problem here.

We need to see investment in the dam in terms of its capacity. Questions still arise as to where the liability would fall if semi-State agencies knowingly flooded communities in this State.

I commend the Minister of State on his dedication in respect of this issue. My concern is that his colleagues in government, namely those in Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, do not share his commitment when it comes to flooding and, ultimately, climate change. I agree with Emeritus Professor John Sweeney that it is time to do what this law demands in the context of climate change.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I have spoken many times in this Chamber about flood prevention and future planning. Climate change means that Ireland will be more prone to flooding due to adverse weather conditions. In my constituency, there are a number of rivers that have either caused or threatened to cause flooding. The River Poddle flows through Kimmage, Crumlin and Harold's Cross. I am happy that a flood alleviation scheme is happening there at the moment. Work on that is ongoing. It cannot happen fast enough, particularly in view of the weather we are having. The River Camac in Kilmainham and Inchicore is in need of culvert repair, embankment reinforcement and other flood prevention measures. The River Liffey flows through Chapelizod, where residents were recently in fear of flooding due to the non-stop rain. Sandbags were issued, but they are only a temporary solution. A permanent solution is definitely needed.

Flooding of a business or home is devastating. The Minister of State may not know, but my husband's family experienced flooding in Germany a number of years ago. All of the homes in the villages around the area where they live were destroyed, as were all of the businesses. A total of 130 people died. Following that was the realisation that many people were not covered by insurance. The German Bundestag is now discussing how to ensure that every property has natural hazard cover, which can be opted out of but which has to be provided. It is time that this happened here as well. We cannot have people left in dire situations. Flooding destroys every part of a home. It also destroys people's lives.

The other thing we need to look at is where we build homes and businesses. Floodplains are not something that should be meddled with. They are called floodplains for a reason. On that basis, we need to be cognisant of what future flooding will do. The insurance issue is one that we really need to get a handle on. It is not just flood prevention; it is also what happens

afterwards when we do not have the flood prevention methods that we should have already in place.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** What we have seen over the past few weeks shows how desperately unprepared the State was for the extreme weather we have experienced. This was not unpredicted. It was predicted 20 years ago that the impact of climate change was precisely going to be much wetter weather. The latter expresses itself in extreme events. Unfortunately, this is the music of the future. This is what climate change looks like in Ireland, and it is going to get worse and worse.

All over my constituency, people have told me about the damage done to their homes. They have told me that this is not the first time this has happened. There is an overwhelming sense that we were not prepared or assisted properly. A constituent from Rathfarnham told me:

There were ten children across six houses blocked in by the water for several hours on our cul-de-sac. Residents contacted emergency services. However, no emergency services attended the estate. We contacted South Dublin County Council, who stated they had no resources available and advised us to contact emergency services instead.

This was predictable, but the State was not prepared. What we have seen since is an attempt by politicians to scapegoat anybody or anything that could be found that could possibly be scapegoated. Met Éireann got blamed. The same people who gave out about too many yellow, orange and red warnings then, all of a sudden, decided that Met Éireann was to blame because it should have had more serious warnings. The habitats directive got the blame. Civil society groups that try to defend our biodiversity and nature and the kinds of measures that would cut across this flooding get the blame. The freshwater pearl mussel gets the blame. All of this is to avoid the question of who rezoned the floodplains, as John Sweeney has noted, who allowed housing closer to riverbanks than was wise and who has drastically underfunded climate adaptation measures for the past 20 years. We need real climate action and real flood adaptation measures.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** Clonmel is finally a good news story where flooding is concerned. We have our flood defences in place on the basis of a one-in-100-years flood that happened previously. They have stood the test of time over the past ten to 12 years, much to the relief of householders and businesses across the town. However, it took forever to get them. I hope that places like Middleton and Enniscorthy do not have to wait as long or endure more floods before defences are put in place.

Clonmel has a history of flooding that dates way. The River Suir consistently flooded both the town and hundreds of homes and businesses from the Old Bridge right along the quays and up to Irishtown. My grandfather Patsy Meaney worked for Clonmel Corporation in the gasworks on the old Waterford Road in Clonmel. He had to go to work by boat from the steps of the town hall during the highest recorded flood in 1925. Fast forward 70 years to 9 February 1995, and his grandson - me - as Mayor of Clonmel, emerged from a successful public meeting called to stop the closure of Kickham Barracks in the town, only to find that I could not get home to the Old Bridge area because of flooding. I had to be transported by the Army in a lorry. I thank the Army for that. It has done tremendous work over the years.

The campaign for flood defences started that night, but it took 17 long years - far too long - and involved too much hardship and too much damage to homes and businesses. Clonmel is a template of what can and what must be done. The Office of Public Works must take Clonmel as the template, and must significantly shorten the time it takes to put schemes in place.

**Deputy Charles Ward:** Communities in the Finn Valley have suffered catastrophic flooding. In Ballybofey and Stranorlar in particular, there has been repeated flooding over the decades, including major events in the 1960s, 1990s, 2015 and 2020. Each flood has caused significant damage to homes, businesses, infrastructure and livelihoods. Families have been traumatised and communities economically and socially scarred, with some failing to recover.

The Ballybofey-Stranorlar flood scheme remains at the planning and design stage, as the Minister of State knows. Work is meant to begin in 2027. The stark reality is that this demonstrates that meaningful flood protections are literally years away, particularly in the Finn Valley, leaving the residents exposed to flooding again into the future. I commend Councillor Gary Doherty of the Finn Valley for his tireless work on this. He has not stopped for years in trying to advocate for the communities in the valley.

Repeated floods and ongoing delays make it clear that funding alone is insufficient. Immediate interim flood prevention measures are urgently required. Flood protection cannot wait because the lives and livelihoods of these citizens, particularly in the Finn Valley area where this has happened before, are petrified it will happen again. We see the constant rising of the River Finn. It is only a matter of time before something happens again.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Climate change is here, and we are seeing what it looks like. This is the beginning of it, unfortunately, with the changing weather patterns that we have been seeing in the past few years. Flood relief schemes are taking from 13 to 20 years, which is too long, to put in place. The Mountmellick and Portarlinton schemes have been planned since 2017. People in the two towns are on high alert the whole time. Homes on Manor Road were flooded again in recent months. Botley Lane in Portarlinton gets flooded, and there is extensive flooding in other parts of the town. Residents are on edge. The progress on both schemes, which are now nine years old, is way too slow. Planning and construction are taking too long. The completion date for those who are centrally involved in the Mountmellick scheme will at best be 2030 or 2032, and maybe even longer. For Portarlinton, it is anywhere between 2030 and 2034, which is 17 or 18 years after the scheme was conceived.

We agree with what is proposed in the motion, except for the seventh point. I would say to Aontú, in the context of taking it away from local authorities, that it actually goes to An Coimisiún Pleanála. It did not go to the local authorities in the context of any of the schemes I have seen. We need to give local authorities more power and a greater role. We need to devolve more powers to them. That is exactly the problem we have because local authorities do not have sufficient staff and powers to deal with these matters. The various studies and reports on ecology, hydrology, archaeology and habitats are taking far too long, as are the public consultations and EIAs. They need to happen in tandem, not consecutively. That is the message I would give to the Minister of State.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** I thank the Deputies for bringing forward this important motion.

I am very conscious as we speak here this morning that there are families all over the country still undertaking a clean-up of their homes and businesses and assessing the impact of the severe flooding on them. Climate change means these floods are going to become more regular and more severe. That is why the approach the State takes to flooding needs to change. In the week since towns like Enniscorthy and Aughrim were inundated, there has been a rightful focus on the engineering solutions and why these are taking so long to deliver. Alongside engineering solutions, there must be a renewed commitment to the delivery of nature-based solutions. Let us recall what we mean by this. Nature-based solutions are about ways to retain the water at the upper end of a river catchment for as long as possible, slow down the movement of that water and allow sufficient quantities of it to soak away, rather than going straight into a river, thereby raising the level and creating the flooding. This is the first piece of flood defence we should focus on. It is not the only piece but it is absolutely essential. It is about looking at upland areas, seeing if there are forested areas to absorb water or fields that can be allowed to flood. It is about paying the landowners and farmers when they allow us to use their lands for this vital flood defence.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Council received hundreds of calls because of flooding in Newtownsmith, along the DART lines and so on. I thank the council workers, both the indoor council workers and the outdoor teams, who had to go out and respond to this. It highlights the chronic underfunding of our local authorities. Ireland is at the lowest level of funding in the European league table by a mile due to the underfunding of outdoor crews and local authorities generally. For decades, we have identified the problem of floodwater, rainwater and seawater mixing with sewerage in our area when the rains come in. The infrastructure has not been put in and the money has not been forthcoming. In Newtownsmith, where there was massive flooding, a gully was taken out about three decades ago. That is the reason all of Newtownsmith was flooded. Everybody knows it. The money has not been allocated to put in a gully which would allow the seawater to flow back out again.

I agree with a lot in this motion but I think Deputy Tóibín should reconsider the criticisms he made of forecasting by Met Éireann and orange weather warnings, given what he is now saying. I do not agree that submissions on flood protection schemes should be limited to people who have a material interest or are locally based. Should experts on flood defences and climatology, for example, not have the right to put in a submission? Of course they should. Part of the problem is that we are not listening to the experts or Met Éireann. We should start listening to them.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I thank the Minister of State for all his work and his engagement with Clontarf since I was elected to this House. This is a story that needs to be put on the record. I am speaking to people from across Ireland who think that Clontarf and north Dublin residents objected to a wall. We are seeing flooding across my constituency, including in Howth on one of the beaches. I welcome what has been done in Portrane and I would love it to be implemented for the houses that are now at risk at the Hole in the Wall beach.

Back in 2008, Irish Water wanted to put an artery across Clontarf seafront and cover it with a berm. This was rejected, rightly so, because anyone who was elderly or vulnerable would

not be able to have surveillance by passing traffic. After that, the community came together and asked for Dublin City Council to make a plan for kerbside demountables. The community never received any such proposal, so how could people accept a proposal they were not given?

I thank the Minister of State for how he has been dealing with the OPW and Dublin City Council engineers and for getting rid of the sandbags in Clontarf, alongside me, after the meeting. It shows what political pressure was needed. The people of Clontarf and surrounding areas were being punished for objecting to a giant berm along the seafront. The Minister of State has seen recently how things have gone on and the dangers of flooding. On the original promenade, there was already a plan for a mountable wall that was built over 150 years ago. I thank the Minister of State for his engagement at a meeting yesterday at which he showed me other plans. I look forward to meeting with him and local residents.

The other thing I hear constantly is that residents in Clontarf and north Dublin asked for a wall to be lowered. That is a completely different wall, which is down at St. Anne's Park. These things get confused and stories are spread by the media to build up hate and mistrust in the system. It is important to get that on the record.

I thank the Minister of State again for his engagement. People are very happy. I look forward to working with him and his Department to get this finalised.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I thank the Minister of State for all his hard work in different parts of the country. I saw him manning the pumps a good many years ago in Athlone town. He has lived with flooding and he understands it. I also want to thank the late Teachta and iar-Aire Martin Mansergh, who did a lot in that Department. He passed away recently and we sent our sympathies to his wife Liz and family. He was a Minister who helped greatly in many areas but mainly in Clonmel. We had trouble and problems in Clonmel for decades but we have a great scheme there now. Obviously, there are little tweaking problems with pushing the water back. I want to shout out to the Clonmel borough district area staff and the engineering staff, Gillian Flynn and Paul Coffey, and thank them for their work putting up the flood defences each time there is a bad forecast. They are working, thank God. However they will not stay working. We have the folly here from our left-wing colleagues. Tá siad imithe now, like snow off a ditch. They come in and put out their fancies. Deputy O'Gorman was talking about keeping water up on the side of a hill. How would you keep water up on the side of a hill unless you had it in a bucket? He could not even hold a bucket at that.

The Waterford deep-sea port was cleaned biannually for decades, up to about 25 years ago. It is not cleaned any more. Every piece of dirt off a roof or dust off the streets and roads, fields, building sites or anywhere else eventually washes into the rivers. There is no place else to go. We must clean the rivers or the flood defences will be rendered useless.

I sympathise and empathise with the people all over Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford and many other areas who were flooded. It is not a nice situation because you do not just get water, you get lots of other stuff as well. As I said, we had solutions offered to us from Denmark and Holland, imaginative schemes about moving water on faster. We also had offers of land south of Clonmel where we would deepen the river, take the topsoil off the land, put in all the spoil and put it back again to grassland, but no, the ecologists said we have frogs, snails and everything else. People's lives and property and the people who cannot get insurance are much

more important than all these ecologists and these green people who tell us we cannot do this because of snails and everything else. We need reform also in the OPW.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank the Minister of State for being very hands-on and for coming to Kerry again recently. Back in 2018, he gave us funding to clear the Flesk river. For ten years before that, we were constantly being told that it would make no difference to clear the river, that it would only make 10 mm of a difference. The highest flood that has been there in the last eight years did not come within 8 ft of the road level and it used to be 3 ft on top of the road before that. They wanted to raise the road and do everything else but the fact is, as Deputy McGrath said, we need to clean the river. That was what always happened until 2002, until some genius decided that farmers could not touch the river any more, clean it out or do what they had been doing for centuries. If they did, they would lose their farm payments. That is why the thing is getting worse and worse. Many of our rivers are still in desperate need of being cleaned. Like Deputy McGrath says, everything comes down from the hills - silt, sand, gravel and every other kind of muck - and lands in the river. If the river is not cleaned out, where is it going to go only spill out over the banks onto roads and into houses? That is the trouble we are having.

The Minister of State saw the courthouse bridge and the pipe that was crossing the eye of the bridge. That is what has been flooding the town of Kenmare for many years. I am appealing to the Minister of State to see again if there is any quick way of removing that. Whatever other work needs to be done can wait. Removing that would alleviate the serious problem in Kenmare at the present time. There are other ideas in other towns and places about holding back the water and creating flood plains. The Minister of State must get himself stuck into them and tell them that the easy way of sorting it out is to clear the rivers. There are no two ways about it.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I raise again the issue of flooding in Cromane, which the Minister of State visited, and coastal erosion in Rossbeigh. In Killorglin town, at Lower Bridge Street, properties are being affected by flooding on a regular basis. I was contacted recently about the area at the fishery which is subject to flooding as well.

We need help and I know the Minister of State has said time and again that there is plenty of money available. I hope Kerry County Council is engaging with the Minister of State regarding these areas. For the residents of Cromane Lower, the very strong tides over the past month will continue until the end of the month. Every year, on St. Patrick's Day, the high tide is a big problem. These individuals and families cannot sleep in their beds at night when there is any sort of a strong tide and it is exacerbated when it coincides with a storm.

I also want to raise an issue that I mentioned to the Minister of State recently. I know he is working on this with the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, regarding insurance for businesses. I would like to include homeowners in that category. They can get insurance for fire and theft and everything else but not for flooding. I was contacted recently by a family which, for the past 40 years, had no problem getting insurance. They are after spending tens of thousands of euro reinstating the embankment. The Department, with the work being carried out by Kerry County Council, provided a second line of defence. The family is absolutely confident that they will never again be flooded. That work was carried out about 15 years ago and they cannot get insurance. Insurance is a huge issue for homeowners as well as businesses.

**Deputy Albert Dolan:** The Minister of State will be aware of the south Galway flood relief scheme. It is set to protect 115 properties, family homes and businesses. What we are facing right now is a series of delays and a lack of action. I know the Minister of State is a person of action and he wants to see something happen. In November, in a response to a parliamentary question, the Minister of State said the scheme would go for planning consent by quarter 3 of 2026. I hope this timeline is adhered to because it is vital that both the OPW and Galway County Council have the responses from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, have the environmental assessments carried out and, ultimately, can drive on with this project. While it a complicated scheme with turloughs, groundwater, rivers, swallow holes, etc., this project needs to be progressed as a manner of urgency. Right now, the east of the country is suffering but for a long time the west of the country suffered. We do not know when we are going to suffer again, and we need to take proactive and preventative measures to ensure this matter is dealt with.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran):** I am grateful for the opportunity to come before the House today. Members have already heard about the important work being undertaken across government to address the issues raised in this debate. I welcome the opportunity to engage further with Members, particularly on the role of the Office of Public Works in managing flood risk in Ireland.

First, I want to recognise the hardship and trauma caused by recent flooding. I have visited many of the affected areas and I understand the distress caused, not only by the flooding itself but also by the ongoing fear of further flooding. The Government is fully committed to taking measures to alleviate these difficulties and reduce the risk of flooding in the future. I thank all those involved in the preparation for, and response to, the flooding events. This includes volunteers, particularly organisations such as Civil Defence, who have done Trojan work and deserve the Government's sincere thanks.

As Deputies will be aware, the response to major emergencies is carried out by the principal response agencies, namely, local authorities, An Garda Síochána and the HSE. Local authorities act as the lead agency for flood events within their administrative areas. At national level, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, through the national directorate for fire and emergency management, is designated as the lead Government Department for co-ordinating the response to weather emergencies, including flooding. In the lead-up to, and during, the flooding events, the Department convened meetings of the national emergency co-ordination group to co-ordinate actions across Government Departments and agencies.

I have listened carefully to the valuable contributions made during today's debate, and I thank Members for their comments. I will now address some of the issues raised and outline the role of the Office of Public Works in managing flood risk. Managing flood risk is a shared responsibility across government. Flood policy is built on three key pillars, underpinned by research and evidence. Prevention involves avoiding or removing flood risk, for example, by avoiding construction on flood plains. Protection means reducing the likelihood or severity of flooding, typically through physical works such as flood relief schemes. Preparedness means reducing the consequences of flooding through public information, planning and emergency

response. The OPW plays a key role in co-ordinating measures to meet the Government's national flood risk policy, particularly in relation to flooding from rivers and the sea.

The Government has committed €1.3 billion under the national development plan for flood relief schemes. This investment aims to protect approximately 23,000 properties in communities at significant risk. Since 2018, this funding has allowed the OPW, in partnership with local authorities, to treble its flood relief work. There are now approximately 100 schemes at design, planning or construction stage. There are currently ten flood relief schemes under construction nationwide. These are at Athlone, my hometown; Crossmolina; Glashaboy; King's Island; Morell River; Morrison's Island; Poddle River; River Wad; Templemore and Whitechurch. Once completed, these schemes will protect a further 2,880 properties and deliver an estimated €361 million in avoided damages and losses. Five of these schemes are at an advanced stage, with at least three expected to reach substantial completion in 2026. At the same time, other tranche 1 schemes are being actively progressed through design, planning and construction.

Recent flooding, including during and since Storm Chandra, arose from multiple sources, including rivers and the sea. For communities awaiting major flood relief schemes, I have asked local authorities to identify all possible interim measures to reduce flood risk. I expect to receive these plans in the coming weeks and will update my Government colleagues accordingly. Flood forecasting and warning are critical to preparedness. Stage 1 of the national flood forecasting and warning service was completed in December 2023. A flood forecasting centre is now established in Met Éireann, providing flood forecasts, hydrological data and daily flood guidance to local authorities and State agencies. Stage 2 is now under way and will focus on providing flood warnings directly to communities and improving the detail and accuracy of forecasts. Oversight of this work now sits with the Government task force on emergency planning, chaired by the Department of Defence.

Our climate is changing. We are seeing more frequent storms and extreme weather events. In response, my office has published the Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan for Flood Risk Management 2025-2030. All flood relief schemes now require scheme adaptation plans to ensure they account for climate change impacts and can be adapted to future flood risk.

Nature-based solutions are also being assessed as part of scheme development and through other delivery mechanisms. The OPW is working with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to develop further guidance to ensure planning decisions properly consider flood risk and avoid exposing new developments to future flooding due to climate change.

I thank Deputies for their engagement. I also want to say that a great number of Deputies have great ideas and have said a lot in this debate. Local authorities deliver schemes. I support them financially, so Members should not stand up in this House and try to blame the Government. Local authorities lead and we support. We have never been found wanting with any local authority. The issues are complex. I ask Deputies if they have ever gone out and looked at the development of a scheme and how long it takes. What is involved is enormous. We have the money now to hand and are working with these local authorities. I have introduced interim measures over the past number of months.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue said there was nothing for channel cleaning or blockages but I announced that funding last October. Local authorities can apply for it to make that work happen. I sincerely thank all the Deputies. People around Ireland have had an awful time over the last number of weeks. I have met some of them and I know what they are experiencing. It is my job, as Minister of State, to lead a whole-of-government approach and help those people in the future.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of this motion. In fairness, money is not a problem but trying to get it done is a problem. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, and I have been involved with Lough Funshinagh for a number of years. I have seen previous Ministers. What had to be done in Lough Funshinagh was a temporary measure to allow the water to be pumped away. Does the Minister of State know what the reason is? The pipes were three quarters down. Environmentalists brought a case to court. The pipes were to go for about half a mile, then on to a river and out into Lough Ree. At one time, the water from Lough Funshinagh used to go out to Lough Ree underground, but that basically blocked up. We are now faced with the situation where scientific studies lasting for a few years are needed to show that the same water that was going out will not damage some bit of a flower on the edge of Lough Ree because it is going out through the river. No matter who it is, even if I was Minister in the morning, they would pull their hair out. I would not have hair with what I am watching with the habitats directive.

We can talk here and give out about relief jobs not being done. However, at the end of the day, it is about the habitats directive and that legislation needs to be changed when Ireland has the Presidency of the EU. Go to Rossaveal in Connemara, which is the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish's area. There is machinery standing up because of environmental objections and a court case. Go down south to all the schemes. Go to Lough Funshinagh. There was a great story told in Galway where there was a flood on the road. The council went out to let the water go. It was rung and told that it could not let water in there because it was a special area of conservation. We would rather have a car crash than let water go.

We can talk about it here but, at the end of the day, the habitats directive was transposed into law by our now retired President, Michael D. Higgins. We must decide to put people and lives before some of the objections, like in Lough Talt. When Irish Water wanted an extraction licence for Lough Talt, an objection was made because of a snail, even though the snail had disappeared for over 20 years. We need to amend that legislation. I am not saying the Government will be able to scrap every bit of it. I took part in an overview of it a few years after it. I would have been as well off if I had gone home and counted cattle, to be quite frank about it. I gave my view, and nothing happened. I ask the Government to change that. It is not for Ministers to do. It is going to take the likes of the Taoiseach and Tánaiste when Ireland has the Presidency of the EU for six months. We need to do that. Go to Dublin Port or Dublin Airport and have a look at it. Go to any road job or any flooding job and have a look at it.

I will give an example which shocked me one day. In Clonberne in County Galway, a young couple were building a house. A drain down near the back of the house goes into the Sinking river, heads on through Slieve to Dunmore, goes into another river, heads for Galway and goes into the River Clare and then goes into Lough Corrib. It is 40 miles away from Lough Corrib. Does the Minister of State know what the couple had to do? They had to get a screening out. They spent €2,500 to be told, "By the way, this won't do any harm." That is where we have

gone as a country because of European regulation. To be honest about it, if I was the Minister or someone else was Minister, we would still be handcuffed and we would be in the courts down the road because of environmental legislation. Until we decide we are going to sort this out, even if it was God almighty, we will have to go through this process for seven, eight or nine years of torture. When all the reports and everything else have been done, we will still be below in the courts for another few years being held up because someone somewhere believes that the little flower is more important than Mary or Johnny's house getting flooded. Until that mentality changes, we are in trouble.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan):** Before I move on to the next speaker, I welcome the students of St. Kieran's College in Kilkenny. They are very welcome to Leinster House.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I thank Deputies for their contributions to this Private Members' motion. I thank the Government for not opposing it. That is important. I thank the Labour Party for its amendment, which we are not opposing. It is a cynical, well-worn experience in this House that the Government does not oppose Private Members' motions but then simply does nothing about them. Accepting a Private Members' motion and not doing anything about it is a good way of saying "Yes" while saying "No" at the same time. That is a problem.

My major worry is that the media will move on from this issue, the political system will then move on from it and-----

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I will not move on from it.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----in 18 months' time, we will back in the same place, with families being inundated and hammered in this situation. We have had many years of Ministers being dispatched to floods in their top boots, splashing around in the puddles on camera for the media, nodding-----

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** Not this man, Deputy Moran. He will do his work.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----empathically to families who have lost everything. That has added up to a hill of beans for those families over that period of time.

I accept that the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, wants to get things done. I accept his bona fides in relation this. He has been this position for a year at this point. We have to get to the root of the problem here. The construction of flood defences is drowning in bureaucracy and red tape. Many flood defence planning applications are taking 20 to 30 years, from concept to completion. Enniscorthy, Midleton, Clontarf, Galway, Sandymount and a rake of others have been waiting ten, 20, 30 years just for the planning applications to go in. The issue is that if there is not a fix for this as soon as possible, there will be enormous damage done to those areas.

The Minister of State mentioned 100 projects that are in planning currently. He also defended the role of the planning process. At the heart of the problem is that our planning system and licensing, permitting, tendering and judicial review systems are all demonstrably

slower than in the vast majority of other European countries. They are all slower here. That means they are broken and not working in this situation. This is tearing at the fabric of society.

Enniscorthy, which was a lake last week, has been waiting 25 years for a planning application. The M50 is a carpark every single day now because of the planning process difficulties in getting roads and infrastructure built. The national children's hospital was promised by 2020 for €700 million, save an asteroid hitting a planet, according to Leo Varadkar. It is still not open and it is costing €2.25 billion. The Minister of State has to recognise that we have a critical crisis in terms of the building of infrastructure and our planning systems. It is an enormous cost financially and in terms of the services we are not receiving. It has to be fixed soon.

We have to set about dealing with the vexatious objections that come from one end of the country to the other. We have to realise that Ireland is now a judicial review hot spot in terms of higher levels of judicial reviews than practically any other country. They are taking longer. Our courts are not sufficiently staffed. If the Minister of State were to physically attack someone on this side of this House today, it would take longer for him to go through the courts in this country than in practically every other European country. The planning departments in the councils and in An Coimisiún Pleanála do not have enough staff. They have far more planners than they had before, but they still have nowhere near the number of planning staff that they need.

I welcome the Minister of State's view that there is going to be zero tolerance of further development on flood plains in the future. The truth of the matter is that thousands of houses have been built in flood risk areas and flood plains, with the permission of the State and local authorities. As a result, the Government is responsible for the costs to the families when they see their homes flooded. We all saw cars floating in the past week in those floods. That is probably the second most expensive item of expenditure that those families will have in their lives, after the cost of their homes. When they ask the Government for help, it says "No" and that it is not helping with that. We need proper funds to be made available to families and businesses when their homes and businesses are flooded. That needs to happen right now.

*12 o'clock*

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before calling Deputy McDonald, I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery the Canadian ambassador, H.E. Dennis King, who is on a scheduled visit. Although I spoke to him earlier this morning, I take a moment to convey from us all our heartfelt sympathy following the tragic incident that occurred yesterday in British Columbia. The ambassador should know that the victims, the injured, their families and the whole community of Tumbler Ridge are in our thoughts and prayers. I thank him for being with us.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I echo the Ceann Comhairle's sentiments entirely. I also welcome to the Public Gallery the delegation from Donegal who are here today to save the flights accommodating cancer patients from the county. I understand they have gathered some 15,000 signatures for their petition over recent days. It is a disgrace that they have to come here to fight that fight but I commend them on their efforts and wish them every success. It is a decision that needs to be reversed.

The Government is set to throw renters to the wolves. Today, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will push through their rent hikes Bill and it will be devastating. Previously, in rent pressure zones, any increase was set at the rate of inflation or 2%, whichever was lower, but the Government is tearing that up and opening up the floodgates. From 1 March, it will allow rent for new tenancies to be reset to the full market rate. This is a hammer blow for ripped-off renters and a gift for big landlords and vulture funds. It will mean huge rent hikes, increased pressure for renters, more young people forced to choose between emigrating and moving home with their parents and, shamefully, it will mean more families and children pushed into homelessness. Up to 60,000 renters will be hit by a huge rent hike every single year. That is the hard truth.

Of course, the Government's defence of the Bill is that six-year tenancies will protect renters, but they will not. A total of 25% of tenancies in any given year are new tenancies, with people moving in and moving on all the time. Most tenancies last three and a half years, not six. The majority of renters will be hit quickly, and hit again and again, and very few will escape these hikes. It will be a nightmare for people who feel they have to stay put for fear of having to pay a hugely increased rent on a new tenancy. It will be a nightmare for students, apprentices, trainees, nurses, teachers and anyone who moves frequently for work or education. A total of 7,000 Irish medical professionals were registered to work in Australia last year. If the Government's Bill goes through, we will lose many more because the rent hikes will be off the charts.

In Galway city, for example, renters will fork out €5,292 more per annum. Here in Dublin, an extra €3,516 a year will be due. In Cork city, in the Taoiseach's neck of the woods, renters will pay an extra €3,336 a year. These increases are on top of already staggering rents. Nobody will be able to afford these increases; there is not a chance of it. It is straight out of the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael playbook to give a big payday to landlords and vulture funds and screw over ordinary tenants. If they gave a damn about renters at all, they would end this rip-off, not fuel it. They would ban rent increases and make rents affordable. Caithfear stop a chur le Bille Fhianna Fáil agus Fhine Gael chun an cíós a ardú. Níl ann ach bronntanas do na tiarnaí talún móra agus cuirfidh sé níos mó brú ar na tionóntaí.

Renters have known for a long time that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael simply do not have their backs. For over a decade now, they have allowed renters to be ripped off relentlessly and mercilessly but they are crossing a big red line here. A Bill to allow rents to be increased by €3,000, €4,000 or €5,000 will do incredible damage to people's lives. It cannot go ahead. I urge the Taoiseach to scrap the rent hikes Bill.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** First, I acknowledge the presence of our good friend, H.E. Dennis King from Canada, and articulate our deepest sympathies to the people of Tumbler Ridge and to Canada more generally on the appalling murder of nine innocent victims yesterday. Our hearts, prayers and thoughts are with the entire community.

I also appreciate and welcome the attendance in the Public Gallery of people from Donegal in respect of the only flight from the county, which is subsidised substantially by the State. Obviously, the Minister for Transport does not get involved in the contract itself in terms of engaging with the contractor. Deputy Gallagher has been extremely active in pressing this issue with the Minister and me from its very first iteration. We are endeavouring to do everything we possibly can legally to try to respond to the needs of the people of Donegal, particularly those who travel for cancer treatment. The Government wants to do everything it possibly can within the law. We will continue to work on behalf of people to enable us to do that.

Regarding the rental reforms, I disagree fundamentally with the Deputy's proposition. In the first instance, we should remember the origin of the Bill was the Housing Commission. I recall Sinn Féin and others saying we ignored the Housing Commission. The commission recommended a reform of the rent pressure zones, coming up with an idea around reference pricing, which it did not detail, and so on. The Housing Agency was then asked to review the rent pressure zones, which it did, and it recommended the nature of the changes the Minister has introduced in terms of the reform of the rent pressure zones, which will give stability, clarity and certainty to renters and landlords into the future.

According to the census, there could be up to 500,000 people renting, from social renting to private tenancies, and up to 240,000 more private tenancies. Those existing tenancies will not be impacted by the Bill. That is the first thing I have to say. There are very important protections, which the Deputy has deliberately ignored, in respect of these measures. The six-year provision gives a security we never had before in this country and aligns us more with European rental systems in terms of giving tenants greater security and greater protection. Dr. Michael Byrne from the school of social policy, social work and social justice at UCD has noted that what is being missed in the current discussion is that the new legislation is designed, once established, to reduce the level of notices of termination. We are now moving to the ending of no-fault evictions.

The ESRI also recommended reform of the rental system. Everybody did, but someone has to make a decision here. The Minister and the Government have taken a decision-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Oh you have made a decision. There is no question there.

**The Taoiseach:** -----to balance this in terms of greater security. It is unquestionably greater security for tenants, and the proof of the pudding is the number of property organisations and landlords wanting to end it or change our proposals. It is interesting that Sinn Féin is defending landlords and property owners who want to get rid of this, who do not want this to go through today. That is the bottom line. They do not want it-----

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** The bottom line is that more landlords-----

**The Taoiseach:** -----and Sinn Féin is trying to usher it in because it is interested in chaos, but supply is also important.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. Time is up. Deputy McDonald to respond.

**The Taoiseach:** Scarcity of supply will be the most impactful thing on prices over the medium term and the Deputy knows that.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** And who is responsible for-----

**The Taoiseach:** Sinn Féin has no interest in supply and has demonstrated no interest for quite some time.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** Neither have you.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Just to explain to the Taoiseach, who clearly cannot grasp this very simple concept, there is no security of tenure if you cannot afford the rent.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is it. When rents climb and climb and you just cannot make it month after month, that is not secure. That is a recipe for chaos in your life. That is a recipe for driving people to Dublin, Shannon or Cork airport to go thar sáile, far, far away to live their lives or, in the case of families, for driving them into homelessness. The Government has made a decision and it has made it very clear whose side it is on. It is on the side of very large corporate landlords; not just any common or garden landlord but the large ones and the vulture funds. They want market rate and the Government is giving it to them on a silver platter. I have told the Taoiseach that most tenancies do not last six years. They average at three and a half years and 25% of tenancies every single year are brand new. Will the Taoiseach answer that?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy could not care less about whether we provide more houses for the young people of this country because every policy-----

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** That is ridiculous. How many years in government now?

**The Taoiseach:** She is against everything. She is against every proposal. She is full of soundbite and shallow-----

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Take responsibility for your own inaction.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The truth.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not the truth. I am telling you now where you are. You have opposed every single thing for the last four years in relation to housing here.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** Look at the housing crisis that-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** And they have objected to it.

**The Taoiseach:** It opposed all the affordable schemes we came up-----

**Deputy Mark Ward:** There are 16,000 people living in homelessness-----

**The Taoiseach:** -----with that were trying to help young people. The bottom line here, through the Chair, is that we need supply and we have to have a rental framework that facilitates investment and greater supply of housing.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** We need Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael out on their ears.

**The Taoiseach:** What the Deputy is ignoring is that half a million people currently renting in Ireland today will not be impacted by these measures because there are a lot of protections built in here. A national rent protection zone is there at 2%. The ESRI recommended 4%, actually. These are modest measures designed to get clarity and stability but, above all-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** You will see.

**The Taoiseach:** -----to bring supply. If you do not have supply, prices will rise, without question, and Sinn Féin has never answered the question of supply.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** You have never addressed supply.

**The Taoiseach:** You are just barren in terms of any ideas-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** We could tell you what was-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach. Time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** -----or any substance around that issue.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up. Before I move to Deputy Cairns, we can have robust debate but I ask all Members that the debate be respectful with a mindfulness towards our Gallery being full.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Gallery is fine. The people in the Gallery recognise the truth.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Today, the Government is using the guillotine to ram through legislation that will have one overriding result, that is, allowing record rents rip even further. Once this legislation goes through, it will mean monthly rents for new tenancies being reset to market rates. People watching at home might not know what that means because the phrase "market rate" does not capture what is really going on here. People will see monthly rents for new tenancies soaring to €2,500 to €3,000 all over the country. That is €30,000 or more every year in after-tax income that renters will be expected to pay. What nurse, teacher, garda or retail worker can afford that? What will happen to our critical public services when staff cannot afford their rents? What will happen to our cities and our towns when people are priced out of them? Why would young people stay here through their 20s and 30s just to hand over all of their income to a landlord? What kind of a life is that? How many more children are going to become homeless because of this legislation today?

I welcome some aspects of the legislation. The Social Democrats have fought for a long time for improved security for renters and for a rent price register. However, the impact of some positive reforms is going to be completely swallowed up by the impact of what the Government is doing on rent prices because people are already struggling to pay record rents. More and more of them are being forced to move back in with their parents or to sleep on friends' couches and record numbers are becoming homeless. This is not just a housing disaster; it is a social catastrophe.

The Social Democrats would do things differently. Just last week, we published detailed plans explaining how we would set up a State construction company and acquire four modular home factories to turbocharge the delivery of social and affordable homes. We have also published plans to set up a new State savings scheme to use just some of the nearly €170 billion sitting in Irish deposit accounts, and earning almost no interest, to build the homes we so desperately need. This could be a real national effort to finally address this crisis that hundreds and thousands of us could be a part of. There are solutions to this housing disaster. There is another way. The Government could finally admit that its approach is not working. It could change course and direction.

What the Government is doing is a betrayal because these plans did not feature in the Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael general election manifestos or in the programme for Government. The coalition parties misled the public on housing figures to get back into power, and then quickly went back to making policies that mainly protect----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy will be back in. The Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** -----developers and investment funds. It is not too late to step back from the brink, abandon plans to jack up rents and finally protect renters.

**The Taoiseach:** First of all, ní aontaím leis an Teachta. Is éard atá i gceist ag an Rialtas ná i bhfad níos mó tacaíochta agus cosanta a thabhairt do na daoine atá ag íoc cíos faoi láthair. Sin bun agus barr an chinnidh atá déanta ag an Rialtas. I do not agree, fundamentally, with the Deputy. Again, this is being portrayed as the Government wanting to undermine renters. That is such a ridiculous assertion. The origins of this come from the Housing Commission. The Social Democrats' housing spokesperson spent about a year and half condemning the previous

Government and this Government for not following through on the Housing Commission. The Housing Commission recommended that we permanently reform the RPZs. The Housing Agency came forward with recommendations to do that. The ESRI said we have to do it. Most economists agree we have to do it. Why? We have to get more supply into the rental market. If we do not, prices will continue to rise. The only effective way to moderate pricing in the rental market is to increase supply. The Government is biting the bullet and taking action here. Some would say it was too modest in terms of the supply side. The Opposition is dead set against any supply measures. It just wants the banning of rent increases. Just ban everything. Everything would then remain static. Prices would increase even more and we would have huge issues with supply. That is the fundamental difference between the Opposition and the Government. We want to sort out the housing issue.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Oh my God. Oh my good God.

**The Taoiseach:** We want to deal with it and we want to take this issue on. I have read and looked at the Social Democrats' policy proposals-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** This is a disgrace.

**The Taoiseach:** -----on a State construction company, which is about social housing, I think they would acknowledge, and would take a minimum of two years to establish. We already have the Land Development Agency, which is doing social housing and affordable housing and will also be doing private housing and doing that mix. The Social Democrats want to create a new agency on top of that just to do social housing, to have direct labour, which I think will be very problematic and challenging in the construction labour market we have in the modern era and I am not so sure it is a tenable proposition. It then says it will create four factories somewhere - just build them.

*(Interruptions)*

**The Taoiseach:** There is a lot of absence of feasibility. There is a real feasibility issue with its proposals. On the SSIA, we did an SSIA in the past but that will be another number of years before the funding comes on stream.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Start now.

**The Taoiseach:** There is huge public money going into housing. There is €9 billion this year and there is multibillion-----

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** If we could get more in, we would not have to-----

**The Taoiseach:** -----going into infrastructure. The issue is we do need private sector investment, which the Deputy's party has a huge problem with. It just hates the private sector.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** The saving scheme is private sector-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach to respond.

**The Taoiseach:** The Social Democrats hate the private sector. They do not believe it has any role in housing.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** Absolute rubbish.

**The Taoiseach:** That is another fundamental difference. The Department of Finance says we need about €20 billion a year to get to 50,000 to 60,000 houses per annum.

We have a clear pathway to doing that. We need private sector investment to create additional supply. Does the Deputy accept that or does she not? Her spokesperson does not seem to accept it.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** When the Taoiseach considers the context of 17,000 homeless people, including 5,000 homeless children, when you consider the fact that rents have gone up 117% between 2010 and 2025 when the EU average is 28.8%, when you consider that house prices are up €200,000 since 2015, he comes in here week after week and says that his approach is working. Every day he stands up and defends his approach and somehow tries to blame the Social Democrats is another day he loses even more credibility on housing.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** All I can say is, I hope in the lead-up to the next election, people judge the Taoiseach not on his empty promises in those few weeks, but on his actions now. In the depths of a housing crisis, he is introducing legislation that allows landlords to jack up rents to so-called market rate in between tenancies, which will result in more children being evicted into homelessness. It is a disgrace.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** Again, the Deputy comes in with the usual soundbites and trot them out-----

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** Get the violin.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and make assertions about the bona fides of people on this side of the House, which I think are unworthy. Everybody in this House wants to resolve the housing crisis. We have a clear view that it has to be a combination of public and private sector investment.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** It is clear to everyone the Taoiseach's approach is not working.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy did not respond to my positioning. She is opposed to private sector investment.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** That is not true. Why are you saying it?

*(Interruptions)*

**The Taoiseach:** I think that is a real issue in terms of getting supply. I did not interrupt the Deputy. She and her party have a habit of continuing interrupting when we try to respond to their points. I have no issue with a debate in the House, but I am making valid points. I have read her party's housing construction policy. In my view, it is not going to add value in the next two to three years. It could not.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The Taoiseach has been saying that for ten years.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy has not explained how it would deal with the existing Land Development Agency, which we have now provided billions for in terms of doing the work that it has to do. It has a pipeline of about 11,000 to 12,000 houses. Her proposals are fairly weak, if I am honest, in terms of dealing with the thing

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** But the Taoiseach has no problem giving investment funds their-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** ----- thousands of euro extra.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not blaming her for anything. I am simply saying what she is coming up with is not that effective or does not really have the capacity to solve the housing problem. There needs to be more scrutiny of what her party is coming up with.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Pot kettle black.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The Government has proposed to scrap the triple lock. In 2013, when the Taoiseach was on this side of House, he said "triple lock ... is at the core of our neutrality". I agree with what he said then. As a member of the defence committee, we have looked at this very carefully, and I am fully convinced that what he said is true. He will try to justify the abandonment of the triple lock because we live in a changed world. He has said things like this, but neutrality was adopted during the Second World War.

The 1960 Defence (Amendment) Act set out clearly that the UN mandate is required for the deployment of a contingent of the Defence Forces overseas. That was in the middle of the Cold War and at a time of huge international conflict. The veto the UN Security Council can exercise is something that is raised. The Taoiseach will use this to try to justify the case for the abandonment of the triple lock. In 2013, he said the UN "is not working as it should but we must not abandon it as an essential part of the international system." I agree with that also.

From 2020 to 2024, the UN Security Council passed 264 out of 284 resolutions without a veto being exercised, and the Taoiseach will tell us Russia will veto a peacekeeping mission. Will he tell me which one it vetoed? I have been looking for it. Yes, Russia's invasion of

Ukraine is wrong, but the United States and Israel are two countries that have consistently undermined and trampled over UN resolutions and UN decisions. I remind the Taoiseach of the weekend poll which again showed 71% of people in favour of maintaining neutrality. This comes on the back of a flood of right-wing propaganda in dozens of newspaper articles over the past 12 months calling for the scrapping of the triple lock and neutrality and the full participation of our Defence Forces in combat overseas.

Proceeding to scrap the triple lock and shredding not one but two national declarations that the Taoiseach's party drew up is likely to be unconstitutional and will probably be met with a court challenge. In the Nice Treaty, the Taoiseach's party put in that: "Ireland reiterates that the participation of contingents of the Irish Defence Forces in overseas operations, including those carried out under the European security and defence policy, requires (a) the authorisation of the ... [UN] Security Council or the General Assembly ... (b) the agreement of the ... Government and (c) the approval of Dáil Éireann". The very same words were used in the national declaration attached to the Lisbon Treaty. A solemn declaration was in the Nice Treaty to hold that. The Taoiseach and I know that the first two attempts to pass the Nice and Lisbon Treaties failed, and his party had to do that to get them through. That is fair enough, but is he now going to shred those two national declarations? Is he now going to repudiate the will of the Irish people and erode Irish neutrality?

**The Taoiseach:** Our military neutrality is defined as not being a member of a military alliance and we are not members of a military alliance.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** We might as well be.

**The Taoiseach:** We do not intend to be. We are not a member of NATO, fundamentally. The triple lock relates to our participation in peacekeeping missions. We want to continue the tradition of Irish participation in peacekeeping missions. It has been a very noble one. It is probably one of the defining qualities of Irish foreign policy. People accept our bona fides in the international field, whether it is military peacekeeping or in civilian peace monitoring, contributions to conflict resolution and participation in multilateral fora from the United Nations, to the African Union and European Union, but the world has changed dramatically. I know the Deputy said the Russian invasion of Ukraine was wrong. I would respectfully say it was far more than wrong. It was appalling, horrific and is having horrific consequences.

If the Deputy stands back, why should Russia have a veto on whether Irish peacekeepers participate in a peacekeeping mission or not? When I say a veto, it is very clear that Russia, geopolitically over the last two decades in particular, does not want UN peacekeeping forces in a lot of parts of the world. If the Deputy takes Niger, Mali and all those areas in the Sahel, what has the Wagner Group been doing there for quite some time and Russia? They have been facilitating *coup d'états*, trying to exploit the natural resources of those countries in return for protecting the elites who perpetrated a *coup d'état*. Is that the country that should determine whether Ireland participates in a peacekeeping mission or not?

The US has decided that the UN should not support the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon, UNIFIL. When I was out in UNIFIL before Christmas, a lot of members of our Army were asking straightforward questions as to where they get the experience in the future of

peacekeeping and what the next theatre is for Irish troops to have experience in peacekeeping. Will the US determine that? Will China determine that? When we were on the Security Council, we wanted to connect climate security and make it a core principle. Russia vetoed it. We nearly got there, but Russia vetoed it.

In increasing times, we have been part of NATO peacekeeping missions. We have been part of European Union peacekeeping missions and we have been part of African Union-led peacekeeping missions. The key issue is the principle of peacekeeping. Why are we afraid in Dáil Éireann, with Seanad Éireann, to give ourselves the unrestricted authority to do that? We are the democratically elected people of this country. What is the problem? Do we not believe in parliamentary democracy? Parliamentary democracy is the cornerstone of one of the longest living democracies around the world, which happens to be Ireland. Maybe a bit more faith in ourselves and self-respect and self-esteem would go a long way to allay the propagandistic fears that have been articulated about this initiative.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I would remind the Taoiseach of two things. One is that I know the UN is not perfect and the veto may be exercised, but I also told him of the 264 resolutions that were passed in a four-year period without a veto being exercised by any of the five, including the US. None of what I am saying goes against strengthening our Defence Forces capacity and having a level of co-operation in terms of sharing information, etc., with other countries. That is not the argument I am making here. If national declarations are made - the Taoiseach's party in government solemnly made those national declarations regarding the triple lock and neutrality to the Irish people - is the Taoiseach going to tear them up? They are there in black and white on those pages. He knows why they were put there. It is a good thing they were put there. Now, what he is proposing to do is stand that on its head. I reminded him that neutrality was brought in by his party in times when the world was at peril, a lot worse than what it is now.

There are some people in the world who have gone mad; I agree with the Taoiseach on that. Netanyahu, Trump and Putin have gone crazy, but what we should not do is join military alliances and add to the madness that is going on. We have bona fides and some credibility to speak at international forums because we are neutral. We need to defend that neutrality.

**The Taoiseach:** It is because my party introduced the concept of neutrality during the Second World War that I have the self-confidence to deal with this and to be absolutely confident that this is not about ending military neutrality. I make that point more generally. We have evolved independent Irish foreign policy-----

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** You said the triple lock is the core of neutrality.

**The Taoiseach:** -----ever since in a manner that has been respected around the world. The UN Security Council is a post-war creation and is ridiculously outdated. Five members of the Security Council do not represent the world any more. Africa should be on the Security Council.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** That is one-----

**The Taoiseach:** Latin America should be on the Security Council. It should be expanded and reformed, but we cannot get reform. We support reform of the UN Security Council. That is a problem in itself.

There is no sense of Ireland being a warmongering nation in any shape or form, nor do we have the capacity to be one. What we have capacity for is being professional peacekeepers, where we have made a significant contribution around the world. There has not been a peacekeeping mission sanctioned since 2014. The one in Lebanon is coming to an end at the behest of the Security Council. We are really restricting our capacity for peacekeeping by the composition and behaviour of the Security Council. That is a big issue which we cannot ignore.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I also acknowledge the presence of the Canadian ambassador, H. E. Mr. King. On a personal level, I thank the Prime Minister of his country for the leadership he has shown at Davos and elsewhere in standing up to buffoonery and a lack of common sense internationally. In particular, I offer my condolences to his country, especially the families of those killed and injured at Tumbler Ridge.

The specific matter I want to raise is hydrogen, but I want to talk about the broader picture first. From listening to a lot of the debates here, I can see the amount of hot air generated. If we put a little turbine at the top of the House, we would be able to light up all of Dublin sometimes. I am a firm believer in investment in renewable energy. We are way behind where we could be. We have the potential to create 37 GW of offshore wind by 2050 and possibly another 15 GW of onshore wind and solar. That is before we even look at areas such as tidal, which the east coast and the Shannon Estuary have an abundance of, and wave energy. We are sadly lacking in that regard. As a result of grid challenges and the fact we cannot store the energy produced by renewables at their peak, we are wasting a lot of energy. Many hard-pressed consumers in my constituency are struggling to pay their bills. It is a huge waste to see all that renewable energy being produced but not being used and dissipating.

The answer in this regard is the creation and storage of green hydrogen. In that context, we have a hydrogen strategy that was initiated in 2023 and a hydrogen plan containing 21 key recommendations that was brought forward in 2025. In the context of reaching our 2030 targets, we are already falling behind. I will digress by saying that we also need battery storage, but hydrogen is going to be key. Off the Dublin coast, on the Kish Bank, there are salt caverns and off the coast of the constituency the Taoiseach represents are depleted gas fields. There is huge potential to store green hydrogen created from renewables with the lowest possible loss from the initial energy generated. We could store green hydrogen for use by industry and aviation. We could be net exporters of hydrogen as well as other forms of energy, such as electricity, very quickly, if we put in the necessary infrastructure right now and ramp up.

I would like a commitment on how soon we can get a hydrogen network operator for Ireland appointed and on getting the pre-planning for the appointment of a safety and economic regulator for hydrogen here done.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am absolutely at one with him in terms of a commitment to investment in renewable energy. Ireland put a lot of eggs in that basket over the past decade and is continuing to do so. In 2023, Ireland was ranked second in the world in onshore wind energy generation. I am not too sure that is appreciated

even in Ireland. We will continue to build on that. The programme for Government includes a commitment to 9 GW of onshore wind, 8 GW of solar energy and 5 GW of offshore wind by 2030. These are very challenging targets.

On the question of hydrogen, some progress has been made, although there is a degree of scepticism as to the timeline for the realisation of the proposals around that. I will return to that. I established a clearing house upon this Government entering office to bring the private sector in to talk to Departments and to hear the perspective of regulators in order that we could hear the perspective of those involved in the wind industry. The purpose of this was to try to accelerate matters and to look, generically, at what barriers there are and the issues holding us back in the generation of offshore wind in particular. I passionately believe we need to get offshore wind farms established - certainly, at least one or two - by 2030 or 2031. That is absolutely essential in order that we show people a clear and tangible pathway as to the journey we are on.

We have made great progress on onshore but increasingly in the House and in public debate, we have mixed views about this. When I use the word "we", I mean society. Already, people want guidelines to restrict solar. Solar is in its infancy, but it is moving very fast. Tremendous progress is being made with solar. There have been global issues with offshore, although I am confident that we can iron out the challenges the wind industry faces in developing offshore platforms.

The grid is vital, as the Deputy said. Potentially, up to €18 billion has been agreed, although it could be €14 billion. We have given equity of €3.5 billion to EirGrid to leverage that funding to substantially increase the capacity of the grid to deal with this.

More work needs to be done on the research side in respect of hydrogen. The Deputy is correct that caverns exist that have potential when it comes to storage. On the issue of tidal, I have been to Wales where I saw fairly experimental - or, certainly, embryonic - projects in place to harness tidal energy. There has been some research in Ringaskiddy in respect of that. If I am honest, however, it seems we are some years off that and off the use of hydrogen as well.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** It is about using this time to try to keep the country on track in relation to the 2025 national hydrogen implementation plan and its 21 key objectives. For example, we are trying to get the potential routes to market for up to 2 GW of hydrogen production from offshore wind by 2030. I acknowledge the challenges in ramping up our offshore wind, but we already have excess capacity at peak times that cannot be used. If this were used, it could push energy prices down and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels further in terms of both the wider climate change debate and our energy security in a very dangerous world. We need to ramp up whatever we can. We could start at least one hydrogen hub based on existing renewable energy production. That is why we need to get the hydrogen innovation fund in place by next year as planned. We need to get the hydrogen network operator appointed. Will the Taoiseach commit to these small steps in order that we can keep on track?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for his commitment and interest in this. Certainly, I will talk to the Minister and the Cabinet subcommittee dealing with this issue in terms of the hydrogen innovation fund, the network co-ordinator and the establishment of a hydrogen hub.

There is a lot of potential here. We should be in earlier, and we should increase our research capacity in that field.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** On the topic of energy, I welcome, on behalf of Deputy Ken O'Flynn, the group of retired CIÉ workers who are in the Gallery. They are most welcome.

### **Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions**

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The announcement by the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, regarding the Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, national roads allocation for 2026 is expected next week. I urge the Taoiseach to prioritise the N24 Waterford to Cahir project.

It is an essential piece of infrastructure for Tipperary, Waterford, Kilkenny and the whole south-east region.

We have just endured one of the worst years for fatalities nationwide. The N24 in Tipperary alone, which is just 65 km of roadway, or 1% of our county's road network, accounts for 25% of our road deaths. That is a shocking statistic - 1% of the network is causing a quarter of fatalities. That reality alone demands immediate intervention. One fatality is one too many. We sympathise with all the families.

This appeal comes not just from me; it has the backing of Oireachtas Members across the three counties. Over the past 20 years, €10.7 million of public money has been spent already on scoping, assessments and everything else. Without sufficient allocation for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, that investment will be wasted and the project will stall yet again. While last year's national development sectoral plan included a welcome commitment to progressing this project, it is now time to turn commitment to delivery. Kilkenny County Council is the lead authority but the N24 is a lifeline for the entire region, connecting Waterford and Limerick to the ports at Foynes and Rosslare and supporting thousands of daily commuters, freight users and local communities.

I also acknowledge the ongoing work of Tipperary County Council roads section, including Liam Brett, John Nolan and their colleagues. Some €3 million is urgently required this month from the Department to prevent the project collapsing. We cannot allow the N24 to be shelved again, as it was in 2002 and 2012. If funding is withheld in 2026, it could take more than a decade to return to the current stage of readiness. Surveys, route options and a preferred transport solution have all been completed at taxpayers' expense. The preferred route proposes a 38% offline and 52% online upgrade. While I have concerns about elements of this near Clonmel, Kilsheelan and even Knockagh near Cahir, they can be reviewed when the scheme progresses to An Coimisiún Pleanála. We simply cannot afford to lose this project again. We must remember the human impact. Several families and landowners face land being sterilised, with some being threatened with their houses being demolished. They are also stressed, so it needs to come to an end. A further €9 million in the next three to four years will bring the project through the statutory planning process. The existing contracts with consultants-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** -----expire on 11 April so funding is time critical-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** -----and delivering the first €3 million next week is vital.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I also welcome the CIÉ workers - perhaps they are gone now - given my background.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** They are just leaving.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy McGrath said the Minister announced-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It will be announced next week.

**The Taoiseach:** It will be next week.

I could not agree more with the Deputy about the importance of road infrastructure. I always argue that the primary objective is road safety. When we did the motorways and so on, that contributed to the reduction of road fatalities and injuries on our roads. We have no issue there. I will talk to the Minister and ask him what his plans are for the N24. The Deputy said that a lot of money has already been spent and that approximately €9 million would get it through the statutory process over the next number of years. I will engage with the Minister on that.

The human impact is key but, as the Deputy said, it is also economically important in terms of people, mobility, tourism, freight and the movement of goods and services. They are extremely important. I think the Deputy said Kilkenny County Council is the lead council and we will engage with it on this. I do not have the full programme in front of me and I am not in a position to outline the specific details of the programme of funding the Minister will announce. I also note the Deputy's praise of the officials in Tipperary County Council. He clearly has a positive and constructive relationship with them on roads and so on.

These roads have to be done. Therefore, anything we can do to get them through the statutory process, we should do. Otherwise it can go on forever. At least if we get to the planning permission stage, there is a clear map ahead. Often a lot of the delays are in the design and planning permitting stages of a project. I will talk to the Minister to see what we can do about this.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. It is vital the project gets €3 million this year, otherwise the contracts will end on 11 April and the work will stop. I have been around long enough to have noticed that it was halted in 2002 and 2012, at huge inconvenience to and angst for the landowners and property owners, along with land being sterilised and wide corridors. That has been reduced, thank God, but there are still landowners on the line. There is a proposal to do the line with some off road and some on road. It is vital.

Kilkenny County Council made a presentation to all Oireachtas Members in the area to keep this alive. If it is shelved again, it will take another ten years. At least if it is shovel ready and

goes to An Coimisiún Pleanála and progresses there, it will be kept alive. It is too important to daily lives and safety, as the Taoiseach mentioned. I welcome that. Look at the carnage. Imagine that number of deaths on 1% of our roads in Tipperary. That tells its own story. I have been involved with some of the families who suffered fatalities there. It is a terrible road. It is a hugely important artery between Foynes Port and Rosslare for the trucks and the bypass of Tipperary town is included in that. It is badly needed to keep this project alive.

**The Taoiseach:** I hear the Deputy loud and clear about keeping the project alive. As I said earlier, we should try to progress projects as far as we can. There are not endless sums of money for every road project at the one time but we can progress projects and I will talk to the Minister about this to see what the pressure on him is and what he is in a position to do. We certainly hear the Deputy loud and clear.

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Children with scoliosis and spina bifida and their parents have been failed once again. They found out from a Sunday newspaper that phase one of the Nayagam review, which looked at the spinal surgeries carried out on 91 children, had been sitting on the Minister's desk. This is a report the HSE has had since September. Yet, families heard nothing from the HSE, Children's Health Ireland or the Minister. They heard the news through the media. Only today will letters land through the doors of those families. The Government has learned absolutely nothing about how to treat these families and children with respect and dignity. The Minister now refuses to publish this report. I want the Taoiseach to guarantee the report will be published, not left on a shelf with families left in the dark.

**The Taoiseach:** It is a serious report. I regret the propagandistic politicking the Deputy has just engaged in on what is a serious issue for families and children. No report was sitting on the Minister's desk. The Deputy knows well there were legal injunctions on how this report would be handled. She knows well it was not sitting on the Minister's desk. Why did she say it was in that throwaway phrase, as though the Minister is callous and does not care? Why does she do that? Is there any sincerity in her position? I regard this report as serious.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Is it serious enough to publish?

**The Taoiseach:** It is very serious. I spoke to the Attorney General about this yesterday. Up to 62 cases have to be looked at. We were only briefed on Monday evening, again due to legal constraints in terms of how it can be shared. We will have to deal with that, yes, but the Deputy should please not trot out reprehensible comments about people's motivations. That is just wrong.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Listen to the families.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Gannon.

**The Taoiseach:** It is too serious for that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up, Taoiseach.

**A Deputy:** Shocking.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Government's behaviour is shocking all right.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Gannon.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** The opposite of restorative justice is the retraumatising of victims and yesterday survivors of the Stardust tragedy expressed feelings of shock and retraumatisation following the Government's announcement. Survivors were told clearly that this would not be a one-size-fits-all scheme. The Taoiseach confirmed in a memo to the Government that exceptionality would be recognised. The Minister stood up in the Dáil and repeated that commitment. What was announced yesterday was a flat payment, finalised without the promised engagement and without a structure to address individual injury or trauma. People who suffered burns and lifelong physical damage and deep psychological harm are being treated identically. They feel dehumanised all over again. That €20,000 amounts to less than €400 for each year of the campaign.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** Will the Taoiseach's Department meet survivors and their legal representatives?

**The Taoiseach:** The Stardust fire was a national tragedy that has left an enduring legacy of pain for the country, particularly the people of north Dublin and the families of the 48 young people who were tragically killed. They suffered a terrible loss, and there has been a lasting impact on the survivors who were injured in the fire. Following the State apology and engagement with the legal representatives of the families, the Government approved a two-phased approach to redress arrangements. Phase 1 involved the establishment of a €24 million *ex gratia* redress scheme for the families of the 48 victims of the fire. That was developed in consultation and agreement with the families' legal representatives and provided for a single, non-scaled *ex gratia* payment of €500,000 to be made to the families concerned in respect of each of the 48 victims. Phase 2 concerns survivors injured in the fire.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Seamus Healy.

**The Taoiseach:** I will revert to Deputy Gannon.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** Retired An Post and Eir workers, some in wheelchairs, protested outside the Dáil yesterday to have agreed increases in their pensions approved by the Government. Those increases have been agreed by the company board, the scheme's trustees, the Communications Workers' Union and actuaries. Some of them were due from 1 June 2025

but cannot be paid until they are approved by the Ministers for communications and public expenditure and reform, respectively. The increases in question will give pensioners little more than the State pension and are capped at about 2% for years despite high inflation rates. The delay in payment is causing real hardship. Pensioners have been waiting for months for these increases. Both the cost of living and bills are going up all the time. When will the Minister, Deputy Chambers, sign off on these increases?

**The Taoiseach:** Is this in relation to-----

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The pensions of An Post and Eir retirees. People who retired from those companies-----

**The Taoiseach:** I am familiar with the issue. I will engage with the Minister for public expenditure on this in order to see where we are. The issue of CIÉ pensions needs to be sorted as well. My understanding is that we are close to getting that one resolved. I will see where we are in respect of the An Post and Eir pensions.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I ask the Taoiseach to intervene personally, because they have been waiting months.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy can correspond directly.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** The Taoiseach is probably aware of the Mosquito - an ultrasonic, high-frequency device that is designed to deter loitering teenagers. It emits a kind of buzzing sound that can only be heard by people under the age of 25. Use of this device seems to be increasing again. My understanding is that noise can be considered an assault under section 2 of the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997, so businesses should be careful about using it, although I am not sure if there have ever been any prosecutions. I would have been instinctively against the use of the Mosquito in the past from a human rights perspective, but there may be specific instances of ongoing antisocial behaviour where they could possibly be used. In that context, will the Taoiseach explore the use of these devices in circumstances where a business could notify the gardaí of antisocial behaviour and indicate that it is switching one on but stop them from being used to prevent innocent teenagers from hanging around and enjoying time with their friends?

**The Taoiseach:** I will engage more with the Deputy on this matter. I will certainly see what potentially can be done in respect of the utilisation of these devices, particularly to prevent antisocial behaviour.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** The Taoiseach appreciates challenging and informed questions from this side of the House. I appreciate the recent rise in Garda numbers - 168 new gardaí were attested last week - and the work of the current and former Ministers for justice on this issue. Blanchardstown got six new gardaí last week, our largest allocation in this Dáil term, but we need more. In the K district, which is my constituency plus Finglas, we have roughly garda per 529 people. This compares, despite our higher levels of recorded crime, with one per 394

people in a neighbouring district. Last year, Pearse Street recorded more than 11,000 crimes while Blanchardstown recorded more than 7,000. They are both really busy stations. In this Dáil term, the entire K district has been allocated just 31 new gardaí. The Dublin Bay South constituency has been allocated 103. I realise that the latter has higher levels of crime, but it does not have two thirds more. I ask that the Taoiseach continue his work with the Minister for justice to ensure that all constituencies, not just mine, have adequate resources.

**The Taoiseach:** In the budget, about €2.74 billion was allocated to the Garda in the recent budget. Within that is enough money for about 1,000 new gardaí, 200 more Garda staff and a doubling of the Garda Reserve to more than 600 this year. A total of 223 trainees entered Templemore in November. That is the largest intake to Templemore since 2014. That brought the total number of trainees to enter Templemore to 794 in 2025, which is the largest yearly total since 2018. In other words, we have to get more recruits through Templemore. That is happening. A total of 215 went in on 9 February. This is the third intake in a row where the numbers have exceeded 200. We are making real progress. The Commissioner has decided to allocate large numbers to certain locations. This has had a huge impact. We will get there, but people are going to have to be patient. How we deploy to the maximum optimum levels is important. Ultimately, this is an operational matter for the Commissioner but more gardaí coming through will mean greater allocations.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Deputy McDonald raised the issue I am about to raise with the Taoiseach earlier. We have campaigners from Donegal with us who made the journey. The long and the short of it is that the Government entered a contract with Emerald Airlines yesterday. That contract will end afternoon flights to Donegal and Dublin. The Government did that despite that Donegal Airport asked it not to because it was seeking legal opinion. The cancer campaign group asked the Government not to do it. Some 15,000 people across Donegal asked the Government not to do it. I made pleas on the floor of the Chamber and privately to Ministers involved asking that it not be done. However, the Government signed a contract that will diminish the service to Donegal.

The people who are here today are not here for the good of their health. They represent not only the 500 cancer patients who, at any given time, see this service as a lifeline but also 15,000 people who signed this petition in the past couple of days alone and who knew that this is going to be a devastating blow. The Taoiseach said he would do everything within legal limits. Will he take the opportunity to set out what can be done?

**The Taoiseach:** Since Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher raised this with me, I met with the Minister. The challenge is that if the contract had not been signed yesterday, we would have no service at all.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Government knew about it in October.

**The Taoiseach:** Let us try to share the problem now. If it had not been signed yesterday, there would be no service. We have to try to work within that constraint. There was one tenderer to my knowledge. The Minister does not get involved in the tendering negotiations. He cannot. I presume the Deputy approves of that in the sense that we do not get involved with

companies, tendering processes and all of that. The fact that there was one tenderer was a problem. We are not satisfied with the outcome. We would have preferred the retention of the afternoon flight and the plane remaining overnight in Donegal. Substantial money is being allocated to the public service obligation, PSO. My understanding is that it is the only PSO.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** What is the Government going to do about it?

**The Taoiseach:** We are looking to review this within three months and to engage with the successful bidder for this contract.

**Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher:** Is the Taoiseach aware of the requirement that will come into place from 25 February whereby Irish nationals arriving by boat, plane or otherwise into the UK will be obliged to present a valid Irish passport? Heretofore, all that was necessary was an ID card. This may not be a matter for the Government of the UK; I think it is Aer Lingus that is involved. It is sharp practice to introduce this on 25 February, which is only days away, when many of our people do not have passports but go to the UK frequently. Could the Taoiseach make some representation to Aer Lingus?

**The Taoiseach:** I certainly will. I will engage with the Deputy in the aftermath of this. Is he saying that any Irish citizen entering the UK? Does it include Northern Ireland?

**Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher:** No. It relates to those travelling to mainland Britain with Aer Lingus.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach and Deputy might need to engage further

**The Taoiseach:** We will pursue this with Aer Lingus and more generally. I will talk to Deputy Gallagher too.

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** I have concerns regarding the deployment of Garda resources in rural towns in County Offaly, including Banagher and many other smaller towns. It is not the remit of the Minister for justice to say where gardaí are deployed. That is the responsibility of the Garda Commissioner. Following approximately ten recent break-ins in Banagher and the surrounding areas, we know that the slow response time is due to gardaí having to be dispatched from Birr.

*1 o'clock*

While operational police decisions, as I said, are down to the Garda Commissioner, does the Taoiseach acknowledge the concern locally that Offaly received no members of An Garda Síochána in the past two Templemore allocation tranches? Will the Taoiseach ask that resourcing and deployment arrangements for the area be examined to help ensure timely responses and maintain community confidence in policing across rural Offaly?

**The Taoiseach:** I accept the issues that have been raised by the Deputy. Ten recent break-ins seems to be a fairly high number. I will engage with the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs

and Migration and the Garda Commissioner in respect of maybe specific actions to stem the tide there and to get to the bottom of what is going on in terms of that level of that particular type of crime. We will also make representations in terms of the allocation of gardaí. As I said earlier, the Commissioner prioritised city centres in Dublin in particular, Cork, Limerick and Waterford and while it is no consolation to the Deputy, the impact has been quite significant in terms of public perception of safety and security. Clearly, we want to get around the entire country and I hear what the Deputy is saying. If Offaly has received nothing, its turn must come. I will talk to the Commissioner about that because, as I said earlier, record numbers are coming through Templemore - the highest number in a long time this year alone. Hopefully, we can continue that and get them out.

**Deputy Brian Brennan:** I want to address flood insurance or should I say the lack of flood insurance. It is estimated at over one in 20 homes and businesses is unable to access insurance. Over the past few weeks, I have met residents from Aughrim, Enniscorthy, Arklow and Bunclody and have seen at first hand the devastation caused by flooding. Moving forward, their biggest concern is simply that they are unable to access insurance. This problem has been replicated right across Ireland. Properties that are protected by multimillion euro flood defences still cannot get insurance. The Government must stand up here as these homes and businesses were approved by the authorities, so we simply cannot walk away. We need to implement a Government-backed scheme in conjunction with Insurance Ireland that is fit for purpose and will address the gap that currently exists and not leave thousands of homes and businesses without insurance.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising a very important issue. There was a meeting this morning of the Cabinet subcommittee on evaluating Storm Chandra. We will deal further with the issue of insurance but there needs to be a balanced, combined approach between the insurance industry and the State. It involves the investment the State is making in a quite significant number of flood relief programmes and the degree to which those flood relief programmes should also impact future insurance, which sometimes can be problematic in the aftermath of the completion of such flood review schemes. Work is under way. We are not walking away from the issue but, equally, it cannot all fall on Government either and the industry has obligations too, so we will engage with the industry and endeavour to see whether we can land this in a zone that both can live with. More importantly, it is about ensuring that the people who are suffering can have some security around their homes and businesses.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** Did the Taoiseach watch the "RTÉ Investigates" programmes last night and the night before on the psychiatric care scandal? At the moment, I am dealing with families who are at their wits' end trying to access mental health services for their adult children. In some of these cases, the person involved is a danger to themselves, their families and their neighbours. Instead of them being turned away from services when help is sought or sent to jail, help needs to be given to these people. Prison is not the answer. Prison is the opposite of rehabilitation for people with mental illness. They need access to community-based treatment. Next Thursday night, I am holding a public meeting in the Newgrange Hotel in Navan for parents who cannot access mental health services for their adult children. What message can I give these parents from the Taoiseach about accessing help for their children? These parents are at breaking point.

**The Taoiseach:** In my view, institutionalisation was the great stain historically on Irish mental healthcare. Without question, we over-institutionalised in the past. Over the past 40 years, we have substantially deinstitutionalised mental healthcare from the old-type buildings and have put more emphasis on primary care and community-based mental healthcare. I accept we have a lot more progress to make and a lot more to do but a lot of progress has been made, particularly forensic medicine in terms of the new investment in Portrane. That is a very high-quality centre - of that there is no doubt. Further funding is going to that centre to increase its capacity in terms of its intensive care.

In addition to that, a lot of work has been done in CAMHS and community health in a whole range of strands. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, can elaborate on this in more detail but, fundamentally, we are not where we want to be in terms of mental health. I accept that but we have made a lot of progress over the past couple of years.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am back to the Garda numbers as well. The situation in Tipperary is appalling. The numbers are just so bad. We got four in the second-last tranche but six experienced gardaí left Clonmel Garda station. We got four in Clonmel. One of those new recruits has since sadly left the force. We got one in this allocation. The superintendents tell me that they struggle to put out a patrol car. People are not getting replies to phone calls and are being told by superintendents now to dial 999 but they are still not getting answered and people are left waiting for hours never to receive a call back. I support the gardaí who are there and doing their best but it is just not fair to or safe for those gardaí. A number of them have been injured when they were on their own with no back up. The situation in Clonmel, Carrick-on-Suir, Cahir, Tipperary town and all the rural areas is chronic. It is lovely to see them all going to Dublin and we support that but we want a fair share in the countryside. The people of rural Ireland are good people and deserve protection but the gardaí they have cannot give it to them. It is a sad situation.

**The Taoiseach:** As I have outlined, we have given a huge funding allocation to An Garda Síochána and record numbers are going through Templemore. A total of 223 trainees entered in November, which was the largest intake since 2014. The total number of trainees to enter Templemore in 2025 was 794, which was the largest yearly total since 2018. A total of 215 trainees entered on Monday, 9 February. That is the third intake in a row where the numbers have exceeded 200. These candidates were all from the 2024 and 2025 recruitment campaigns, so we will diaidh ar ndiaidh, gradually, allocate more gardaí around the country as they come through Templemore. A lot of progress has been made and we will continue to make progress. Offaly has been mentioned and the Deputy mentioned Tipperary. We will get around to the country in terms of the further allocations.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** On Monday, nurses began a work-to-rule in Naas General Hospital over what they say are unacceptable and unsafe staffing deficits. These include a failure to comply with the agreed safe staffing frameworks, a failure to increase staffing to meet a 25% increase in attendance at accident and emergency and maternity leave posts not being filled. Will the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health reach out to the HSE to get it to come to the table meaningfully to bring this to a resolution?

**The Taoiseach:** There is established industrial relations machinery to deal with disputes, be they local disputes in particular hospitals or national disputes, and I encourage all involved to refer this to the industrial relations process so that these issues can be addressed.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** At budget time, I welcomed the additional SNA posts. I was concerned as to whether these were new or existing roles but I did welcome them. All of us in this House have received numerous emails over the past day or so following SNA reviews and information that has filtered down to schools. I have been contacted by numerous teachers, principals, parents and SNAs, particularly from Bweeng National School. Many schools that have been notified that they will have their SNA resources reduced for the coming school year have informed me that this does not reflect the reality on the ground. When they tell me resources are not only needed but need to be increased, I take that very seriously. The NCSE has created a rigid system in the allocation of SNAs that does not take into account the majority of learning difficulties faced by children in our schools. SNAs have contacted me with very legitimate and genuine concerns for their work. They are concerned about whether they will have a role in their school next year and whether they will have to move for work. They now feel that they are in limbo. We should not treat any worker in such a manner. Will the Taoiseach ask the Department of Education and Youth and the Minister to intervene immediately to alleviate these concerns and provide some clarity to these SNAs?

**The Taoiseach:** We need to stand back a bit in terms of the situation regarding SNAs. There has been an incremental exponential increase in the number of SNAs. We now have about 25,000 SNAs - 24,925.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I welcome that.

**The Taoiseach:** I know. I am making the point about whether the view is that we keep on increasing, that we have no reviews or that we do not evaluate the system. We do need to stand back a bit.

I spoke to a principal recently who said we need other forms of provision as well. We are bringing in school therapy for special schools through the national therapy service. In some continental schools, they have behavioural therapists which can facilitate integration in mainstream schools. Obviously, I cannot get into every individual school, but I hear what the Deputy is saying and will relate it back to the Department of Education and Youth. However, the numbers have gone up substantially again this year as a result of the allocation. There are individual school allocations then pertaining to the criteria of the NCSE too.

**Deputy Michael Murphy:** I speak on behalf of the small convenience store, often the only store now in every village in rural Ireland. I want to raise serious concerns about the new tobacco and vaping licence fee due this month. What was a once-off fee of €50 is now a combined annual fee of €1,800. That is a 3,500% increase and 36 times higher than what it previously was. I understand the public health issue at the heart of this, but the fact that the small convenience store must pay the same as the big players in the market - the Tesco and Dunnes Stores of this world - is very unfair. The average licence fee across the US, the southern

hemisphere and the European Union is €250. I ask the Taoiseach to urgently review this fee as it applies to the small retailer and to apply the SME test.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy and I understand where he is coming from to a degree, but the requirement for a licence to sell tobacco and nicotine inhaling products was enacted in December 2023 and it came into effect earlier this month. It follows on from a recommendation for a national tobacco control policy from Tobacco Free Ireland and it is designed to give an enforcement authority to the HSE's national environmental health service.

We know tobacco kills one out of every two smokers and is responsible for about 4,500 deaths a year. We want to end tobacco consumption. Vapes, on other factors, are worse in terms of other impacts on public health. I know the Deputy is asking if there can be a differentiation between larger and smaller retailers. I will talk to the Minister about that, but I do not think we can resile from a fundamental issue facing us a society. The vapes, to me, are big tobacco's revenge after we substantively dealt with the tobacco issue. It came back around the corner with the vapes, which are doing real damage. I met Dr. Fauci a year ago and he outlined the damage to me in no uncertain terms.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The Taoiseach is a Cork man like myself. He knows The Glen area well. He should remember that back in 2013 the people of The Glen objected and were against the building of a new prison in The Glen. They were given commitments at that time that the old prison would not be used as another prison and that it would be used for education, the community and historical purposes because Thomas Kent was executed there and buried there for years. The Government now plans to knock the old prison, reneging on promises that were given to the people of The Glen and surrounding areas of St. Luke's, Dillon's Cross and the Old Youghal Road. The Government will not give the northside a hospital, a ring road, an accident and emergency department for children, clean water or a regional park, but it will give the northside a second prison. We are sick and tired of being treated like second-class citizens. We do not want a second prison. Build it somewhere else. We have one prison in The Glen. How can the Government justify building a second prison in the middle of a residential area? It is wrong and a betrayal of the people of The Glen and the promises that were made.

**The Taoiseach:** There has been huge investment in the northside of Cork by this Government and the previous Government. There has been huge investment and regeneration in the Deputy's area, which he has ignored. We are progressing the elective hospital in Glanmire.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** When?

**The Taoiseach:** It is progressing. We have now worked out the road issues with the city council that had-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** No, I was at a meeting last Friday with the chief executive. That is not true.

**The Taoiseach:** I spoke to the chief executive on the issue three weeks ago. I did not interrupt the Deputy. He has created a vision of doom and more doom. There has been huge investment and the northern distributor-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The planning has not even gone in for the road for the new hospital.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy needs to go back and forth on the topic. He should not ask a question on policy and legislation if he is going to engage like that. Every Member understands the structure of the debate. The time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** I just want to make a point about the northern distributor road. One of the most important companies in the country and in Europe, Apple, has 6,000 people employed in the northside. We are going to facilitate the people of the northside.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** What about the prison in The Glen?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy kept interrupting me. I could not get a word in.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I asked a question and it was never answered.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** The Deputy kept talking.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** In 2024, 37 new bus shelters were built across Dublin city. In 2023, the figure was 30 and even in 2022, post Covid-19, 23 new bus shelters were built. In 2025, three new bus shelters were built across Dublin. We can understand why people are a bit sceptical about the housing targets with a construction record like that. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Transport why the Government's ability to deliver new bus shelters has collapsed in the last year?

**The Taoiseach:** I will talk to the Minister for Transport, but I presume, as the Deputy knows, that the statutory agencies have a significant role in terms of bus shelters.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** They need money.

**The Taoiseach:** There is no shortage of money in the bloody system. Come on. Dáil Éireann should not have to discuss the provision of bus shelters.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes Leaders' Questions. Before I move to the next business, I welcome the former CEO of PepsiCo Ireland, Mr. Frank O'Mahony, who is in the Gallery. That is from Deputy O'Sullivan. Mr. O'Mahony is very welcome.

This is a very important time for a new Deputy, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, who will introduce his very first Private Members' Bill.

## **Education (Medical Emergencies in Schools) Bill 2026: First Stage**

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce Bill entitled an Act to enable the Minister for Education and Youth, by regulations, to make provision for promoting participation by a greater number of school staff in approved courses of training in first aid for medical emergencies, for a greater number of schools to be listed as organisations whose staff are authorised to administer certain prescription-only medicinal products without a prescription, for the purpose of saving life or reducing severe distress in medical emergencies; and to provide for related matters.

I am very proud to introduce my first legislation in the House. This Bill is about ensuring we can strengthen our schools to be safe environments for our children and for our school staff.

This Bill is both personally and professionally significant to me. In 2021, at 21 years of age, I got my first epileptic seizure. As Deputies can imagine, it was very much a life-changing moment. Over the course of the next four years, I got regular seizures and, with that, an increase in anti-seizure medication each time. Not to get too personal, but I now take daily medication to prevent epileptic seizures, so my early 20s have been life changing.

I turn now to why this Bill is professionally significant to me. I am a former secondary school teacher and was very privileged to teach in two wonderful schools, Coachford College and Mayfield Community School. I am proud to say I taught fantastic students and worked with dedicated and caring colleagues in both schools. However, I have huge concerns as to how well prepared all school communities in this country are and how equipped and trained staff are to deal with medical emergencies.

This brings me to the main focus of the Bill. The Bill will ensure that the Minister for Education will have the power to introduce regulations to promote the participation of sufficient staff in approved training courses in first aid for medical emergencies. This will cover the giving of prescribed medication to children and their own colleagues if they were presented with a medical emergency. I certainly believe all school staff over the lifetime of their careers will be presented with a medical emergency.

I have consulted closely with Epilepsy Ireland on the wording of this Bill. It stated:

Ensuring our teachers and educators are equipped with the information they need from the outset is the whole purpose of our calls for Seizure Safe Schools. The bill obviously expands to other medical conditions and not just epilepsy, but we are delighted to see legislation being introduced that could make Seizure Safe Schools a reality.

I am proud to have close links to Epilepsy Ireland. It, like other organisations, is fantastic in providing and promoting how we as a society can inform ourselves on how to deal with medical emergencies. Other Deputies will be aware that on Monday, we marked International Epilepsy Day. Epilepsy Ireland has a very clear message: "Time. Stay. Safe". Time the seizure, stay with the person and make sure the person is safe. It is very clear, and I encourage everyone to familiarise themselves with this message.

However, epilepsy is just one medical condition. There are many others that affect many students and staff in our schools. In drafting this Bill, I have also closely engaged with the three teaching unions. Naturally, as with all legislation, there will be teething problems.

However, I truly believe that, as a Parliament, we can work through the issues that may arise, particularly around workload and liability. For the benefit of our children and school communities, I am sure we can work together to enact this legislation.

This is positive legislation. It is about making sure our children and school staff who have medical conditions feel safe going into their school environment each day. It is about ensuring parents in this country know that if their child has a medical emergency, there are school staff who can manage the emergency quickly and in an appropriate manner.

Schools are wonderful environments. Our school staff work extremely hard, day in and day out. They are valued members of our communities. Our children are really fantastic. They have such talent across so many fields. I am proud to say I have worked with so many of them and, as the Taoiseach will agree, any person who stands inside in a classroom for a day will learn a lot more from these children than they thought they already knew. However, we must ensure that, as a House and as policymakers, all school environments are safe, secure and welcoming environments. I commend this Bill to the House.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill being opposed?

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler):** It is not opposed. I compliment the Deputy on the timeliness of the Bill, after International Epilepsy Day on 9 February. Well done.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to move that Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

### **Report on Operation Kenova: Statements**

**The Taoiseach:** I will be sharing time with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond.

Ar an 19 Meán Fómhair, d'fhoilsigh Rialtas na hÉireann agus Rialtas na Breataine creatcháipéis maidir le hoidhreacht na dTrioblóidí. Bhí sé sin i gcomhréir lenár ngealltanas sa chlár Rialtais chun gníomh agus fócas marthanach a chur ar an dtuiscint agus na naisc atá rithábhachtach chun síocháin agus athmhuintearas buan a chothú idir gach cearn dár n-oileán. Creidim go bhfuil síocháin agus athmhuintearas ar oileán na hÉireann bunaithe ar phlé oscailte agus macánta ar an am atá thart. Is cuid rithábhachtach den chomhrá seo é an foilseachán a phléifidh muid inniu.

The Operation Kenova report is the fruit of nearly a decade's work and compiles findings across Operations Kenova, Denton, Turma and Mizzenmast. Many of the details are uncomfortable. They relate to a terrible period in the history of our island but my position, and that of my party and the Government as a whole, is that the past must not be hidden. It must not be allowed to be a forum where different groups present not just their own narrative on the past but also their own set of facts.

Unfortunately, we have been unsuccessful in the past three decades in getting certain elements and organisations to be open and honest about the behaviour of their members and supporters. Governments must operate to a clear standard of openness and accountability. Investigations such as this are required because of the terrible impact of these crimes on victims and their families. They deserve our support and our recognition of how long they have been waiting to know the truth. The Kenova report is an important step in delivering truth and transparency to these families. Despite this, as I have said repeatedly, it has not yet received the attention it deserves. For this reason, I very much welcome today's discussion.

To start, I express my appreciation to Jon Boucher, Sir Iain Livingstone and the entire Kenova team for the work that led to this hugely significant report. Their investigation has followed over 12,000 lines of inquiry, taken thousands of statements and interviewed hundreds of people. They faced and had to overcome many hurdles to get at the facts outlined in the report. As commendable as the level of detail is the nature of their approach. The Government has consistently called for a victim-centred approach to legacy issues. We should note that Kenova investigators worked to comply with Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights and victim-led investigations. It is to the team's credit that its investigations earned the trust and support of many of those affected and have been recognised by families and victims groups as a paradigm for how independent, historical investigations can achieve real results.

The Kenova report details at length an investigation into potential criminal offences committed by the long-time senior Provisional IRA member and British agent known as Stakeknife, as well as potential offences by members of the security forces in respect of Stakeknife and others connected to him. The identity of Stakeknife is clear to everybody here and I have previously stated that the agent should be officially named by the United Kingdom Government. Particularly because of his close relationship with those who like to refer to themselves as the republican movement, it is widely known that Stakeknife was Freddie Scappaticci. He was recruited by the British Army, with which he worked between the late 1970s and 1990s. He was a prized informant and during this period, the British Army dedicated a 24-hour phone line within its intelligence section to his calls.

Throughout this time, Stakeknife was implicated in what were by any measure "grotesque [and] serious" crimes committed for and with the Provisional IRA. This included 14 murders and the abductions of 15 individuals. The details uncovered by the investigation are harrowing, pointing towards shocking acts by the Provisional IRA, including "torture, inhumane and degrading treatment and murder", to quote from the Kenova report. The investigators further note: "These assaults and human rights violations were perpetrated to intimidate and subjugate the community." To intimidate and subjugate the nationalist and republican communities across the North was the Provisional IRA's intent and that of those who endorsed the Provisional IRA-Sinn Féin. That was the Provisional IRA's practice. No amount of aggressive revisionist history from its supporters will ever erase its crimes against its own community. It

is widely accepted that the Provisional IRA was responsible for over 1,700 deaths in Northern Ireland. It was a scourge on all communities, including those communities it falsely claimed to protect.

More than 25 years after the Good Friday Agreement, it is staggering, as the investigators state, that the "republican leadership have failed to acknowledge and apologise for PIRA's murderous activities and the intimidation of families". In fact, things have reached the extreme position where public representatives and figures honour the Provisional IRA but launch legal cases against anyone who points to the vicious crimes that were committed.

As utterly abhorrent and shocking is the British Army's knowledge of Provisional IRA's activities. The Kenova investigation extensively documents the fact that MI5 had sight of Stakeknife's role within the Provisional IRA and its internal security unit and was involved from the outset in briefing Stakeknife through the force research unit of the British Army. The report details instances where murders "were not prevented or investigated when they could and should have been". What we see is a profound failure where, in the report's own words:

Time and again, it would appear that protecting the agent outweighed protecting the life of a victim or protecting the right of their families to seek justice for the crimes committed against their loved ones.

In some cases, had the Royal Ulster Constabulary, RUC, or An Garda Síochána been alerted by the British Army to what it knew was happening, people could have been rescued from the Provisional IRA gangs that were torturing and murdering them.

While the activities of Stakeknife have dominated headlines, the full report also outlines the important findings of Operations Mizzenmast and Turma. Mizzenmast is an independent police investigation into the murder of Jean Smyth-Campbell who was tragically shot dead in a car in west Belfast in 1972. It uncovered significant information regarding the killing of Ms Smyth-Campbell that had been missed by previous investigations.

Operation Turma is an investigation into the murders of three RUC officers, Sergeant Sean Quinn and Constables Paul Hamilton and Allan McCloy, in an explosion at Kinnego embankment near Lurgan on 27 October 1982. Operation Turma commenced in 2019. Alongside a detailed review of all the relevant information, the investigators adopted modern-era forensic examination, including the recovery of DNA material from the original crime scene. It stands as testament to the rigour of the Kenova team that after more than 40 years, an individual has now been extradited from this jurisdiction to Northern Ireland and is currently awaiting trial. The skilled work of the investigators shows that prosecution for historical crimes is possible.

The full report also includes a summary of Operation Denton, a review into a series of sectarian attacks committed by a network of loyalists between 1972 and 1978, known as the Glenanne Gang cases. Operation Denton examined 98 incidents on both sides of the Border, including the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, the Dundalk bombing, the killing of Seamus Ludlow and the Silverbridge attack.

It also examined a range of official and non-official inquiries including the McEntee and Barron inquiries and the work of the Oireachtas joint committee. It is deeply regrettable that the full publication of the Denton report is not available and has been delayed. In particular, I

want to acknowledge the continuing frustration felt by the survivors and families affected by these shocking and tragic events.

While we await the full publication of the Denton report, the summary remains important and offers official recognition that a network of loyalist paramilitaries and “corrupt members of the security forces”, primarily members of the UVF, working with members of both the RUC and UDR, murdered up to 120 people, among them those killed in Dublin and Monaghan in May 1974.

It is also the case that suspected and known collusion by individuals, which is now confirmed in this report, had a corrosive effect on confidence in wider state forces, to the detriment of all. What we see in Kenova is British state forces' collusion with the Provisional IRA and, in the Denton summary, British state forces' collusion with loyalist paramilitaries. In both cases this led to extensive loss of lives and enabled intimidation across communities and across this island.

We want to see the publication of the full report of Operation Denton in the near future and will continue to report regularly on efforts to make this happen.

As I have said, the Kenova report confirms that legacy investigations can yield new and important information. This was achieved through a combination of the dedication of the investigators, the positive relations and trust established with families and victims, and productive North-South co-operation. The report emphasises the positive role played by the Government, including giving access to material held in this jurisdiction and close co-operation with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration.

At every stage the position of my Government and every Government I have served in is that we must have absolute openness and accountability. We must demonstrate the standards which we are calling on others to meet. The investigators also underline the essential role played by An Garda Síochána which “assisted with access to records and forensic exhibits and gave considerable help in making contact with witnesses and persons of interest”.

Guided by the principles of the Stormont House Agreement, the framework agreed by the Governments aims to promote reconciliation and provide mechanisms for truth, accountability and justice for victims and survivors of the Troubles, and their families. Reciprocal co-operation is at the heart of the joint framework. This includes the establishment of a dedicated unit within An Garda Síochána as a central point of contact for victims and families for Troubles-related investigations undertaken by An Garda Síochána and for cross-Border co-operation on Troubles-related cases. An Garda Síochána has further committed, where possible, to answer questions that a family may have in relation to the investigation of a Troubles-related incident and to provide a report to the family.

The Kenova report makes for difficult reading. It is a catalogue of horrific crimes, failure and hurt that affected all communities. In setting out the activities of Stakeknife, it sheds essential light on the harrowing pain and loss caused to individuals, to their families, and through the systematic exercise of terror to communities at large by the Provisional IRA. We should have an apology from Sinn Féin in respect of the activities of the Provisional IRA as documented in this report. It is long past time for that apology and renunciation of what happened to occur. It also shows the complicity of British state forces in allowing this to

happen. The material contained in this report has provoked very strong emotions, and rightly so.

One of the great tragedies of Irish history and of the most recent conflict is how little concern people have had for the victims of their own side. For too long, different interests have demanded accountability from others but done nothing for the victims of their own side's violence. If you are sincere in wanting to build a real peace, reconciliation and shared future for all who share this island, then you cannot with any honesty deny so many people truth and accountability for the terrible crimes committed against their communities and their loved ones. Though difficult, truth and transparency will remain pivotal to achieving lasting peace and reconciliation across this island. The Kenova Report demands a frank and robust debate.

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** As the Taoiseach said, the Kenova Report is a difficult read but it is an absolutely essential one for all of us in this House. Everyone must face up to the wrongs of the past honestly and squarely if we are to achieve lasting peace and reconciliation on this island. The survivors and the families of the victims of the atrocities detailed in this report, and society as a whole, deserve no less. We should not seek to excuse or minimise the harm and suffering caused, no matter by whom. We must continue to seek answers and engage with difficult truths such as those found by the Kenova team.

The Government is committed to playing its part in addressing the legacy of the Troubles across these islands and has taken, and will continue to take, concrete actions to make this a reality. I will return to those actions later.

This report is a hugely important contribution to the search for answers and accountability. It represents the culmination of ten years of painstaking, rigorous work and I echo the Taoiseach's words of appreciation for the leadership provided by Jon Boutcher and Sir Iain Livingstone and the dedication of the entire team behind the report. The work undertaken by Kenova across its four workstreams - Kenova, Denton, Turma and Mizzenmast - was wide-ranging and each is of significant public importance. I take this opportunity to express my condolences to all those who were injured or lost family members in the litany of incidents examined in the report. It is the sad reality of the history of the conflict, however, that the question of collusion, which has been so damaging to the pursuit of consensus on the legacy of the Troubles, is at the heart of two of these: Kenova and Denton. As the Taoiseach has rightly said, it is the corrosive effect of all collusion, both known and suspected, that undermines the confidence of families in legacy processes and our collective ability to move on from the conflict.

In relation to Stakeknife, the allegations about this figure in the Provisional IRA and his links to British intelligence have been notorious for many years. Kenova has exposed the nature and extent of the collusion that took place in relation to Freddie Scappaticci. Kenova expressed caution about the careless use of the term "collusion", but there can be no doubt that collusion took place in relation to Stakeknife. It was a perverse form of collusion in which the interests of British intelligence and their efforts to protect their informant at the heart of the Provisional IRA coalesced with the Provisional IRA's own murderous and illegitimate actions to judge and savagely punish those it deemed a threat to its aims.

On the part of the British security and intelligence services, there were repeated failures to protect the victims of the Provisional IRA from harm and to bring those responsible to justice. Consequent on this were 27 cases in which Stakeknife was personally connected to the commission of serious criminal offences, including murder, attempted murder and unlawful imprisonment.

Informants are vital to policing and security the world over, to the prevention and detection of crime and to safeguarding democratic governments from those who would seek to undermine them by terrorist acts or other threats. What is catalogued in Kenova goes far beyond the rules with which informants and their handlers must abide. Being an informant is not a licence to commit unlawful acts of the most serious kind or to act with impunity. I want to put this on the record to reassure the House.

Stakeknife's personal role in the violence carried out by the Provisional IRA is shocking and grotesque but it should not obscure the wider reality that Kenova's casework covered a total of 101 murders and abductions by that organisation. Kenova has rightly framed the Provisional IRA's role in this savage violence against innocent people as grave violations of human rights intended to intimidate and subjugate the community. It is a fundamental principle of human rights that they are universal and transcend political affiliation. There was never any justification for these violations of human rights to occur, even in the course of a bitter sectarian conflict.

In relation to Operation Denton, the summary report has underlined what was already either suspected or known in relation to many of the cases under review: that collusion between the UVF and the British security forces was taking place. While Denton concluded that there was no single, easily defined group operating from the Glenanne farm, as has been extensively alleged, it is no less shocking that Denton found evidence that there was a wider, more diffuse network of loyalist paramilitaries and members of the security forces that acted together to carry out vicious sectarian attacks across this island.

Ten of those incidents occurred in this jurisdiction, including the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. While Denton found that the prospect of any successful prosecution in relation to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings was extremely unlikely from a UK perspective, I would emphasise, as I have done repeatedly, that the Garda investigations remain open and An Garda Síochána is fully committed to actively pursuing any new evidence that comes to light. That remains the case for all unresolved Troubles-related cases.

I want to take this opportunity to refer to another incident, not so well known and publicly remembered, that was also examined as part of Denton. That is the Dublin Airport bombing on 29 November 1975, in which John Hayes, an Aer Lingus employee, a 38-year-old father of three young children, was killed. The 50th anniversary of his death has passed, and it is regrettable that no one has been held accountable. I met his son, Brendan Hayes, recently. Without commenting on our discussion, I would say that it brought to the fore the lack of awareness of the importance of engaging with family members in the aftermath of such traumatic events, and the need to keep them informed of developments in the investigations. In the 1970s, family liaison was not an established concept in policing but, thankfully, policing today is in a very different position, and family liaison is embedded in policing practice. In the joint framework on legacy agreed by the Irish and British Governments last year, both

Governments have recognised that we need to have a victim-centred approach to investigations into Troubles-related incidents.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond):** I thank all of the Kenova team for their work. Over the past decade, they have shown that, almost 28 years since the Good Friday Agreement, legacy investigations and reviews can work. It is clear that the Kenova team has gone about this complex and sensitive work with care, placing victims and families at the heart of its endeavours. That is as it should be.

In both the interim and final reports, the Kenova team is unsparing in its criticism of both the Provisional IRA and the failings of the British state. In Jon Boutcher's own words, the actions of the Provisional IRA were the most "shameful and evil" he has ever encountered. Kenova found evidence that the Provisional IRA "took violent and punitive action against women and children in their family homes while detaining and torturing loved ones suspected of being agents". As recommended by Kenova, it is time those responsible acknowledge and accept, finally, that these crimes were wrong, and apologise to the victims and the families who have suffered at their hands.

Kenova also raises serious questions about the activities of British state forces in the running of agents, finding "clear evidence of collusion with loyalist paramilitaries by state actors." For Jon Boutcher to conclude that it is probable that Stakeknife's continued operation as an agent "resulted in more lives being lost than saved" is a damning indictment of a state apparatus that was meant to protect people at a time of conflict.

Although Operation Denton does not provide evidence of collusion occurring at a political or strategic level, there is clear evidence that "paramilitary groups were regularly supplied with intelligence by members of the security forces". This is deeply shocking and disturbing.

I am conscious of the debate currently taking place in Westminster on legacy. This debate must, first and foremost, be about victims. Some try to make it only about veterans. Whether paramilitary groups or individual members of the security forces, when you commit a crime, you should face the consequences of your actions.

Let us also recall that there are many among the community of victims, survivors and families who themselves are veterans, having served in the British Army or the RUC during the Troubles. However, the idea that members of the security forces have faced disproportionate investigation or prosecution is divorced from the facts on the ground. The vast majority of those prosecuted for Troubles-related offences to date - tens of thousands of loyalists and republicans - have been members of paramilitary groups. Between 250,000 and 300,000 British soldiers served in Northern Ireland during Operation Banner. Only 29, or 0.01%, were prosecuted for murder or manslaughter.

We must continue to discuss the past on the basis of objectivity and evidence, just as Operations Kenova and Denton have done. In relation to Operation Denton specifically, I am disappointed that publication of the full report has been delayed by legal challenges. It is my hope that we will see the publication of the full report as soon as possible. As laid out by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, the families of those killed in the Dublin and Monaghan

bombings have waited more than 50 years for answers, and the Denton report can be an important contribution.

The joint framework on legacy announced by the two Governments last September was a significant moment - the first agreement of its kind in over a decade. With it, we now have an agreed way forward on legacy, with reciprocal co-operation on investigations, inquiries and inquests at its core. Implementation will be key in both jurisdictions. Legislation is currently making its way through the House of Commons, and we are working hard, at pace, on our own implementation. This Government will not be found wanting.

The findings from Operation Kenova bring to the fore the dark and violent events of our past. To leave the legacy of the Troubles unresolved is to hold back the essential work of reconciliation. It is to allow trauma to pass down the generations. The Kenova team has shown us that there is a way forward. It means placing victims, survivors and families, from all communities, at the centre of our work. This is what the joint framework aims to do. It gives us a chance to end this cycle. It lays the ground for a profound transformation, one that will facilitate greater truth, accountability and, where possible, justice for victims and their families.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Today, this House is asked to reflect on the findings of Operation Kenova, findings that go to the heart of how the conflict on this island has been understood, explained and justified for decades. For too long, the story of that conflict was presented as one in which the British state was a neutral arbiter, acting reluctantly, forced by circumstance into extraordinary measures. That story shaped public understanding, shaped political responses and, for decades, insulated grave wrongdoing from scrutiny.

Before addressing those findings, I wish to say this clearly and directly. To all those who have suffered such grievous loss, I am sorry for all the lives lost during the conflict, and for the hurt and loss endured, without exception. Those words reflect a genuine sense of sorrow and regret for everyone who was hurt and harmed during those years of violence. By that, I mean civilians, combatants and families whose lives were forever changed. Ní féidir le tuairisc ar bith, díospóireacht ar bith, nó próiseas polaitiúla ar bith a bheith mar réiteach iomlán ar an gcostas daonna. No report, no debate and no political process can ever fully address that human cost.

Operation Kenova exposes the lie at the centre of the long-standing narrative of the conflict, which I mentioned at the outset. Its findings are stark and deeply disturbing. A senior British agent was involved in killings. The British state knew, and it protected him. It allowed violence to continue in order to preserve operational advantage. Victims were not warned, families were left in the dark, lives were treated as expendable. This was not an error. It was not a failure in oversight. It was a deliberate political choice. Kenova confirms what many families have long known, but which was long denied: collusion was not an aberration, but a defining feature of British state policy during the conflict. Its findings sit alongside decades of documented evidence, from the Glenanne gang, involving members of the RUC, UDR and loyalist paramilitaries, to the Stevens inquiries and the de Silva review into the murder of Pat Finucane. Each reached the same conclusion: collusion was real, systemic and sanctioned. Kenova corroborates that truth.

As we discuss these findings, my thoughts are with the families who lost loved ones, families whose grief did not end with the passage of time, and whose dignity and persistence

have been extraordinary. They engaged with Kenova in good faith, often at immense personal cost, reliving the most traumatic moments of their lives in the hope, not the certainty, of truth. All families are entitled to truth, justice and acknowledgement. That is not a political demand. It is a basic principle of the rule of law.

It is precisely where Kenova was constrained. The report makes clear that MI5 deliberately obstructed the Kenova investigation. Information was withheld, investigators were impeded and investigative material was interfered with. This behaviour was not isolated. It mirrors earlier interference with judicial processes, including during Judge Cory's work on the Finucane case. What emerges is not confusion or coincidence, but a clear pattern: intelligence agencies actively managing exposure, and placing operational advantage above legality, accountability and the rights of victims. These were not marginal practices. They flowed from a counterinsurgency doctrine authorised at the very heart of the British state. The purpose was simple and chilling: to prevent the truth from ever fully emerging.

Operation Denton reinforces this picture, confirming collusion between British state actors and loyalist paramilitaries in a campaign of systematic murder.

Taken together, the Kenova-related reports expose criminality, collusion and cover-up at the highest levels of the British state, including actions carried out within this jurisdiction. That should alarm everyone in this House.

Far from drawing a line under the past, these reports deepen the questions that confront us. Given these findings, the Irish Government must now actively consider a full public inquiry into British state activity in this jurisdiction, including the Dublin-Monaghan bombings and other killings of Irish citizens. This is not about history alone. It is about whether this State will assert its responsibility to its own people when another state has demonstrably acted unlawfully on this island. By withholding truth and blocking disclosure, British state actors have forfeited any claim to good faith in dealing with the past. The evidential gaps in Kenova echo what we saw in Bloody Sunday and countless other cases: gaps that were not accidental but that were engineered. Despite the scale of evidence, the message is unmistakable. British state actors will not be pursued, regardless of the dead. That is not the rule of law; that is impunity.

This brings me to the British Government's legacy agenda. The legacy Act, with its sweeping national security vetoes and additional protections for state forces, is designed to close down truth, not to deliver it. That is not reconciliation; it is foreclosure. It places a clear responsibility on the Irish Government. If Westminster's legislation fails to meet human rights standards or fails to command the confidence of victims, Ireland cannot and must not be party to it. There cannot be quiet acquiescence, no technical compliance, no diplomatic shrug. Ireland cannot lend its consent to another British-authored process designed to entrench impunity for acts that claimed the lives of hundreds of Irish citizens. That is why the inter-state case must remain firmly on the table. To withdraw it would be to signal a retreat, not reconciliation.

The publication of the Kenova report is not the end of the story. It is another chapter in a long struggle between families seeking truth and a state determined to avoid it. The question now, therefore, is not, "What will Britain do?" The question now is, "What will Ireland accept?"

**The Taoiseach:** What about yourselves?

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Kenova exposes a central truth about the conflict on this island. Collusion was not accidental. It was not exceptional. It was embedded in British state policy. Today I want to focus on an issue this House cannot avoid. Many of the crimes exposed by Kenova did not stop at the Border. They crossed into this jurisdiction. When they did, Irish citizens were entitled to the full protection of Irish law, but they did not receive it. The most searing example remains the Dublin-Monaghan bombings, the single deadliest attack of the conflict, with 34 people killed and hundreds more injured. While Operation Kenova did not investigate those bombings and made no findings on collusion in that case, it did expose the protection of agents, the withholding of intelligence and the prioritisation of operational advantage over human life, which is all directly relevant to the understanding of how such atrocities were allowed to occur. More than 50 years later, not one single person has been held to account in respect of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings. Reports have been published and limited investigations have been carried out but this State has never delivered a full public inquiry with statutory requirements to compel all relevant evidence, particularly material held by British authorities. Nor has there ever been a sustained diplomatic or legal pressure applied to force disclosure from the British Government. Families were not failed by a lack of sympathy, although in many years since they did not even get that, but they were particularly failed by the absence of urgency and resolve on the part of this State.

That failure did not end in 1974. In 1975, John Francis Green was murdered in Monaghan. To this day there has been no prosecution. Serious and unresolved concerns remain regarding the involvement of the British state forces. Again, despite credible information and repeated appeals from his family, there was no investigative urgency matching the gravity of the crime. Once again, the burden of seeking truth fell on grieving families rather than on the institutions that were there to protect them. Deadly attacks linked to the conflict continued here in the years that followed. Almost forgotten is the bombing at Dublin Airport which killed Aer Lingus worker John Hayes from Balbriggan and injured nine others. Decades later, there is still no clarity for the Hayes family as to whether a full investigation file was ever sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions. That uncertainty alone speaks volumes about the inadequacy of the investigation. As in other cases, questions arose about access to intelligence, forewarning and whether lines of inquiry involving British state actors were ever fully pursued. Once again, not a single person held to account. Even into the 1990s, the attacks continued. At The Widow Scallan's pub in Dublin, Martin Doherty was murdered and a massacre was only narrowly averted by his actions. Again, no prosecution. Again, no closure. None of these were isolated incidents. From the 1970s through to the 1990s, attacks were carried out in this jurisdiction by loyalist paramilitaries operating with the knowledge, assistance or protection of British state forces. In too many cases, investigations stalled, lines of inquiry involving British state actors were never fully pursued and files went cold.

The truth is that the evidence says quite clearly that the authorities in this State often stepped back when they should have stepped forward. There was and is an abdication of responsibility, a dereliction of duty, a shameful record. Operation Kenova confirms that British intelligence agencies were prepared to obstruct investigations, withhold evidence and interfere with due process to protect agents. That raises an unavoidable question. How much more could have been done and how much more could have been uncovered if this State had insisted early,

forcefully and consistently on full accountability for crimes committed within this jurisdiction? Sovereignty has to mean something. It carries responsibility. The first duty of any sovereign state is to vindicate the lives of its citizens.

**The Taoiseach:** Are you blaming the State for Scappaticci?

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** That is why we must now confront the failures in how many cases have been handled here. Did you want the floor, Taoiseach?

**The Taoiseach:** I am wondering are you blaming the State for Scappaticci.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I am not, but I will tell you this, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** Extraordinary. You have not mentioned it either.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** On the first occasion that I had to attend a commemorative event on Talbot Street to remember the Dublin-Monaghan bombings, the involvement by this State on that occasion was the presence of special branch men who were taking notes of the family members. That speaks to what I am talking about today.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** Ah, come on. That is outrageous.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Irish Government supported the establishment of a historical investigations unit under the Stormont House Agreement in 2014 and legislated for co-operation in 2019. That unit was never delivered. Instead, the British Government introduced the shameful legacy Act, rejected by victims and widely criticised. If this State recognised the need for historical investigative units in the North, it cannot credibly argue against establishing an independent, time-bound unit here. Seeking truth about Dublin-Monaghan, John Francis Green, the Dublin Airport bombing, the bombings in Castleblayney, Belturbet and elsewhere, The Widow Scallan's and other attacks - this is not about reopening wounds. Those wounds have never healed because the truth was withheld. Justice was not unavailable; it was deferred and denied. The Kenova report has stripped away many of the old excuses. No one can now claim that collusion is speculative. No one can pretend obstruction was accidental. After Kenova, ignorance is no longer plausible. The only question left is whether there is the will to act. Maybe the Taoiseach would like to take the remaining minute of my time to answer that question. Is the will to act there right now?

**The Taoiseach:** Are you serious? You have some brass neck, I can tell you that.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly):** Taoiseach, you know full well comments are through the Chair. We will move on to Deputy Bacik.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the recently published Kenova report. I pay tribute to Jon Boutcher, Iain Livingstone and the Operation Kenova team. Their work was victim-centred and groundbreaking. They have proven that an ECHR-compliant investigation into a Troubles-related incident is possible, despite decades of denial and obstruction by successive British Governments. I will speak to various issues raised by Kenova and will raise several questions for the Minister and the Taoiseach throughout my contribution. I will follow up in writing on those.

Any discussion of the Kenova report and its operation must begin, as the report itself does, with the interests of victims, survivors and their families.

*2 o'clock*

I wish to offer the condolences of the Labour Party to all those injured, bereaved and affected by the atrocities committed during the Troubles.

This is the report of victims and survivors. Their decades of pain must remain at the heart of this debate. Nothing can undo the suffering they have endured as a result of the bloodshed. Fully implementing the Kenova report's recommendations can, of course, help and begin to address the suffering. In exposing the activities of Freddie Scappaticci, or Stakeknife, the Kenova report offers clear evidence of collusion and cover-up by the British state, resulting, as the report says, in more lives being lost than saved. Yet, we know that the British state has not fully accepted responsibility. Instead, we have heard vague regret, a blame game and an unspoken pact of silence that has left victims with half truths and justice denied. I welcome the fact that each of Government spokesperson has named Stakeknife as Freddie Scappaticci. We all know that he killed, abducted, tortured and maimed. He was, in effect, a serial killer who was protected and even paid by the British state to terrorise and murder within his own community. This was all done under the direction of the self-appointed, so-called army council of the Provisional IRA.

I welcome the fact that we are naming him in this House. I also welcome the fact we are speaking openly about his activities. It is extraordinary that he was allowed to kill with impunity. He was resettled, financially rewarded, shielded from justice and protected to the end and beyond, extraordinarily to the same level as the British royal family in some instances, with even the publication of his will blocked, as the report makes clear. The handling of Stakeknife is a glaring example of British security elites' treatment of the Troubles as a conflict without rules, one where innocent lives did not matter and where the rule of law was breached.

Operation Kenova did not just examine the collusion by the British state. The report also makes clear that the republican movement protected Freddie Scappaticci. His victims were silenced to protect the movement. The reality is that for them directing terrorism had nothing to do with political ideals, but everything to do with power, self-enrichment and the exercise of dominion over communities they claimed to defend. To this day, as the report makes clear, neither the IRA nor the republican leadership have issued an apology to the many victims of Freddie Scappaticci and the IRA's internal security unit.

Operation Kenova recommended that the republican leadership apologise for the provisional IRA's abduction, torture and murder of those accused or suspected of being agents and that it acknowledge the harm and intimidation suffered by victims and bereaved families. The Taoiseach earlier called for Sinn Féin to make an apology in this vein. I support that call.

Will the Government make time in the Dáil for such a statement to be made? It should be a clear and meaningful apology, specifically to the victims of the Provisional IRA's campaign and those killed as a result of Freddie Scappaticci's actions.

This is not about partial truths; it is about full truth and honesty. I listened to the Sinn Féin leader. We need to hear full truth and honesty in this House when we are having a debate on a report as important as the Kenova report. This has a bearing on other cases too, as I think we are all aware. I raise by way of example the case of Denis Donaldson, which I have raised before in this House. While Scappaticci was shepherded to safety, by both his British and republican handlers, Donaldson was exposed and, of course, was murdered in Donegal in 2006. While his killing took place after the Good Friday Agreement came into place, it was clearly a Troubles-related incident. I reiterate my call for a cross-Border public inquiry into his killing. The Minister should advocate for the investigation of Mr. Donaldson's case and other cases that were barred by the Legacy Commission, notwithstanding that some incidents occurred outside of the timeline chosen.

I want to move next to issues around MI5 and to its failure to disclose several files to Operation Kenova until after the investigative process had taken place. The absence of full disclosure has failed victims and their families, including those of Sean Brown and the disappeared. This clearly has a bearing, not just on the investigation that is reported, but on the legacy processes under construction today. On Tuesday next, I will be hosting Claire Hanna of the SDLP and a range of other speakers for a briefing on legacy issues and the legislation the Minister stated that we are going to be bringing through this House. I would welcome attendance by Members across the House.

If the national security veto is used to conceal evidence of collusion or double standards, the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill will fail. Does the Minister accept that the legacy commission should be liberated from the Northern Ireland Secretary of State's national security veto? Will the Government push for a public inquiry into the murder of Sean Brown and the restoration of all inquests? Can the Minister clarify the position regarding the managed late disclosure of files by MI5 to Operation Kenova? Operation Kenova did a lot to expose farcical, blanket application of the neither-confirm-nor-deny, NCND, policy adopted by the British Government in legacy-related cases. It is a tool that should be used to ensure confidence in intelligence policing, but it has been used to conceal collusion. We know it has been waived in the past. I commend the Chief Constable on his efforts in seeking a policy that is victim centred and transparent. Does the Irish Government believe that the British Government should review the policy of NCND in all legacy-related cases?

On accountability, 29 files were sent by Operation Kenova to the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland but not a single prosecution has followed. I support the SDLP's call for independent counsel to review the files concerned. I would welcome the Minister's support in respect of that call.

What next? There are many learnings to be had from the Operation Kenova investigation. John Boucher created new structures for how we can inquire into the past and investigate harms, injustices and murders committed in the past. Operation Kenova demonstrated an admirable rigour. We must ensure now that other tragedies such as the Omagh and the Dublin-Monaghan bombings are investigated with the same rigour. I agree that it is deeply regrettable that the Denton report has not been published in full. We need to ensure that independence is

at the heart of all investigative work. I have submitted parliamentary questions on issues around the operation of the Garda legacy unit. Can the Minister outline what independent oversight will be put in place with its operation?

Operation Kenova made real testimony central to its work. The Minister recognises the importance of the family reports delivered by Operation Kenova. Will the Garda legacy unit adopt the same methods? Indeed, Operation Kenova saw real accountability. In that context, will the Minister make a statement on the Government's position regarding further protection of veterans, as signalled by Hilary Benn as part of the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill?

The Kenova report tells a story about the worst of a state that signally breached the rule of law and engaged in appalling collusion and cover-up. The British state was meant to protect individuals. However, we saw instead the loss of lives that the state was meant to guarantee. Ultimately, the Kenova report is about ensuring there is confidence in the rule of law, because the activities of the British state and the activities of paramilitary organisations undermined the rule of law and human rights protections. We need to look at the impact of that undermining. We see the consequences, which are evident in the absence of faith in institutions now. Three decades on from the ceasefire, 25 years since its establishment and nearly 30 years since the Good Friday Agreement, Catholic recruitment to the PSNI has not reached 30%. Recruitment levels in some Border counties are in the low single figures. In that vacuum, suspicion and division are entrenched. We can see the possible and real consequences that would result from a Farage premiership in Britain in the future for our island, for the peace process and for the Good Friday Agreement.

Failure to implement the Kenova report's recommendations will erode trust further. Failure to implement a truly honest and robust legacy framework will do the same. Dealing with our past is not limited to any one piece of legislation or to the outworkings of the joint framework. It must permeate the tone of our politics and how our communities interact across the island. As a Connollyite republican, I aspire to see a united Ireland, as the Labour Party does, but I enunciate that position from a place of understanding that there are those who do not agree. We must work to ensure that we can build a consensus across the island to deliver the shared island that most of us in this House aspire to. As stated, on Tuesday next I will host a briefing in the Oireachtas on the legacy legislation. I would be glad to welcome the Minister, other Ministers and colleagues from across the House to come and hear from the SDLP, the ICCL, the CAJ and Amnesty International as to what the legacy framework can and must mean. In seeking to secure a shared future on this island, we cannot miss the opportunity to deal properly and robustly with our past.

To victims and survivors of the Troubles, I say this: the Labour Party is committed to dealing fairly with the past, to truth - not selective truth or partial truth - to accountability and to justice and to legacy mechanisms which meet standards under the European Convention on Human Rights. No individual can be placed beyond the reach of the courts. This is about people who have been hurt, who have suffered and who have been bereaved. Their right to truth and justice is absolute, not partial or selective. The Kenova report tells us how we can honour the rights of victims to truth and justice. We in this House have a duty to abide by that and learn from the principles of and the recommendations contained in this report.

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** I welcome the opportunity to discuss the findings of the report relating to Operation Kenova. I would like to add my voice to those of previous speakers in expressing gratitude to all of the Operation Kenova team for their work over the past ten years. They have proven, beyond doubt, that legacy investigations and reviews do work.

Their stellar commitment has shone a light on a very dark part of this island's history and exposed the institutional failings that helped that darkness to prosper.

This investigation delved into what, to say the least, is a very challenging subject for many people. The report makes for very difficult reading. The Troubles were without doubt one of the most difficult and heartbreaking chapters in the history of this State, the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. Across 30 years, the seemingly countless atrocities that occurred brought a raw and constant pain to the people of this island. The existence and presence of Stakeknife, acknowledged by the Kenova team to have caused the deaths of more people than he spared, is one such atrocity. This investigation needed to be handled with sensitivity and care for the victims, the survivors and their families, and with a search for truth placed right at the centre of its work.

We all agree, on the basis of the findings in the report, that the Kenova team prioritised seeking truth. It prioritised providing long overdue answers to families and demonstrated that meaningful engagement with victims is both possible and, crucially, essential. This victim-centred approach must be, without doubt, the model that future legacy investigations follow. Respect should rightly be given to the dignity and courage shown by victims, survivors and their families over the past ten years. In its final report, the Kenova team highlights serious wrongdoing by both paramilitary and state actors. It exposes collusion by and failures on the part of security forces, condemns the IRA's brutality and states very clearly that even if crimes predate the Good Friday Agreement, anyone involved, whether terrorists or members of the security forces, should face consequences.

I am mindful of the ongoing debate on legacy issues in the UK and the calls by some for a door to be closed on the Troubles once and for all. However, I am of the opinion that we do not learn from history by ignoring it. We learn from history by engaging with it and by listening to those who lived through it. As a former member of the Defence Forces, I understand that justice for veterans without victims is an empty justice. To properly reconcile ourselves with the past, we must take into consideration the views and lived experiences of victims. This is why I am heartened to see the Government taking the lead by engaging with the Government of the United Kingdom on the joint framework on legacy. This framework recognises the crucial importance of co-operation in legacy matters. At its heart lies the conviction that by working together on our shared history, we can pave the way for a collaborative and peaceful future.

Today, we are blessed to live on a peaceful island. Our young people have no recollection of what it meant to live through that terrible time. We must always remember, however, that peace is not inevitable. We should never take it for granted. I know that this Government has no intention of taking peace on this island for granted. I look forward to seeing the joint framework on legacy progress over the coming months.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Operation Kenova was deliberately undermined by the British state agency, MI5. The actions of the latter were designed to block the truth of Britain's dirty war

in Ireland. It is clear that the legacy investigations and reviews published as part of final report relating to Operation Kenova provide further confirmation of collusion, criminality and cover-up by the British state. Operation Denton confirms collusion between British state actors and loyalists in a campaign of systematic murder. Collusion was absolutely no illusion. Pat Finucane, the Glenanne gang, Sean Graham's betting shop, Loughinisland, Stakeknife - the list goes on. I was in the Widow Scallan's pub on the night it was attacked by loyalists. Hundreds of people escaped due to the fact a bomb failed to go off, but also as a result of the bravery of volunteer Martin Doherty that evening.

Our thoughts are with the families who lost loved ones and those who campaign for truth and justice. I pay tribute to their courage in engaging with a process that often meant reliving the worst moments of their lives. I also pay tribute to groups like the Relatives for Justice that worked tirelessly for truth for the victims. I acknowledge there is no hierarchy in grief. All families are entitled to truth and justice.

The findings in the Kenova report shine a glaring light on the lengths to which the British establishment and its agents were prepared to go to evade their responsibilities and to establish and handle loyalist death squads and undercover armed groups such as the Military Reaction Force. The British Government, MI5 and other state actors, have broken the law to cover up their parts in collusion. They did so by giving the green light in respect of what happened and by averting their eyes while innocent people were murdered and maimed. The British establishment allowed its agents and loyalist murder gangs to act with impunity and then left grieving families without any closure or information on the deaths of their loved ones. This cover-up continues, particularly as the British Government intends to use the joint legacy framework and new legislation to provide sweeping national security vetoes to shut down access to truth and justice and additional protections for state forces whose members supplied bombs and ammunition to the UVF, the UFF and others to carry out large-scale atrocities across the North and in the Twenty-six Counties. The Government cannot stand by another British-authored whitewash designed to conceal Britain's dirty war in Ireland, which claimed the lives of many hundreds of Irish citizens both sides of the Border.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on Operation Kenova. At the outset, I welcome the findings in the final Kenova report and to commend the work done by those involved. The pursuit of justice after many years is difficult. The Kenova report has demonstrated that it can be done, particularly when we follow a framework that prioritises victims and their families. We need to acknowledge that this has taken a long time, that people have died waiting for the truth and that justice delayed is justice denied. The report's consultation with the WAVE Trauma Centre, whose representatives recently spoke to the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, is a welcome approach and one that aims to put victims and their families first in the search for justice and reconciliation. I hope that this will have positive implications for future peacebuilding activities.

The report delivers long-awaited confirmation of responsibility, accepting that there was "deplorable collusion" by members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Ulster Defence Regiment and loyalist paramilitaries, which contributed to 127 deaths during loyalist attacks on Catholics in the early 1970s. This marks an important step towards greater transparency on the activities of state agents during the Troubles. Despite this progress, however, there is still

a need for further clarity. The report illustrates that a lack of truth for victims of extrajudicial killings and their families persists. A review of the Kenova report published by the UK Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 9 February 2026 reveals the extent to which the British Government's policy of neither confirming nor denying the identity of agents involved in paramilitary violence limited Operation Kenova's ability to complete a comprehensive and entirely honest investigation into state collusion and extrajudicial killings. A prime example of this limitation is the refusal to name the agent known to the British Government and to the families of the victims he killed as Stakeknife. The review ends with the following recommendation:

It is not normal practice to name agents of the state, in this one instance it is appropriate, proportionate and strongly in the public interest for the Government to name the agent known as Stakeknife. We have been reassured that naming Stakeknife would not put any active agents at risk, discourage existing agents from continuing their work, or deter the recruitment of new agents.

There is a frequent refrain when information on British state wrongdoing during the Troubles is withheld that the release of information would "undermine public confidence". It is not the truth being known or not which undermines public confidence; it is the fact that this level of collusion happened in the first place and that innocent people lie in their graves because of state agents like Stakeknife. If anything, information is desperately needed to provide not only justice to families but also confidence in the system for victims, families and communities affected by violence across the North. To withhold such information only invites a continuation of suffering, injury and grievance.

On 19 September 2025, when the joint framework between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland was announced, we promised to rebuild the trust of the diverse communities of Northern Ireland and assured them that legacy issues can be addressed in a manner that is both sensitive and productive. The Irish and British Governments committed fully to "recognising that investigations into Troubles-related incidents should be victim-centred". It is vital that here in Ireland we follow through on these commitments and that we use every lever available to us to ensure that our British counterparts do the same.

It is clear from the report, however, that impediments to honest investigations are leaving the burden of seeking justice to traumatised and bereaved families and communities. Those families have bravely carried forward the campaign for truth. Today, the grandchildren of victims continue to fight for even the smallest measure of recognition for their lost relatives, whether through memorialisation, education or simply an official acknowledgement of the atrocities that occurred. In the absence of meaningful action from authorities, the burden of justice has been placed squarely on their shoulders, allowing victimhood and intergenerational trauma to persist. That is wrong. It is the responsibility of the authorities, which are guilty of historical collusion and which have failed past generations and which continue to fail them, to admit the fact of that collusion to the public and to themselves.

As we approach the 28th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, I am reminded of the fragility of its peacebuilding framework, which has served as a blueprint for countries affected by conflict across the world. That international recognition demonstrates that there are valuable lessons in our experience here with regard to power-sharing, acceptance and the rebuilding of

community from the ground up. There are also a number of lessons we must learn in return, and, of course, our peace can never be taken for granted.

People continue to be failed by the British Government's persistent refusal to acknowledge its culpability for atrocities. That refusal threatens the legal framework of the Good Friday Agreement, which has already been shaken by Brexit, the legacy Act and now a potential UK withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights. The latter underpins the Good Friday Agreement and remains as essential to the peace process today as it was in 1998. Any talk of an attempt to withdraw from the convention by the British Government expresses a disregard for the binding role it plays in the legislative framework of the agreement. That is equally true here, where the convention is also coming under attack, particularly with regard to migration. In recent years, both Governments have adopted tougher rhetoric on migration, increasingly framing the ECHR through the lens of border control and deterrence rather than as a broad rights-protecting instrument. Legislation such as the UK's Illegal Migration Act signals a willingness to limit the practical effect of certain convention rights in asylum and deportation cases, raising questions about compatibility with international obligations.

Any narrowing of ECHR protections risks clashing with the explicit commitment in the Good Friday Agreement to incorporate and uphold convention rights in Northern Ireland. The agreement assumes broadly equivalent rights protections north and south of the Border. A more restrictive migration-focused approach could disrupt that balance. The Good Friday Agreement is built on mutual trust between the UK and Ireland, sustained by shared respect and standards for human rights. Moves perceived as weakening universal human rights protections, even in the migration context, may unsettle the delicate peace on this island.

People and their human rights, not political parties or newspaper headlines, must be at the centre of peace and reconciliation. Governments have lost sight of this, as attested to by the unilaterally agreed legacy Act. That legislation prioritised a political closure of the Troubles over individual and community rights to truth, justice and accountability, which are crucial elements for reconciliation in a post-conflict society. By stopping normal legal routes and offering conditional immunity to those who caused harm, we deny the dignity and humanity of victims. Dr. Sandra Peake, CEO of the WAVE Trauma Centre, stated at a recent meeting of the Good Friday Agreement committee that the decision by the British Conservative Government in 2020 to dismiss the Stormont House Agreement:

... caused fundamental harm, particularly to those bereaved. The state was in effect saying those who had died no longer mattered and their cases were no longer of concern to the state.

In an 18-month period, her organisation received over 1,000 new referrals from those bereaved who had not accessed services previously.

While I welcome the findings of the Operation Kenova report, I remind the Government that while we are quick to celebrate and remember the progress of the Good Friday Agreement, we cannot forget the families blocked along the way from getting the justice they deserve. Their family members mattered and were loved. They deserve the truth. This is not history; it is a painful and present reality for many and it cannot be buried. It is vital to the peace process that the British Government name the state agents responsible and accept responsibility for the role of the British state in those deaths.

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** Is rud suntasach é foilseachán na tuairisce ar Oibríocht Kenova. Is léiriú cuimsitheach é ar scéalta dorcha ár n-oileáin agus ar thréimhse a d'fhág fulaingt, pian agus cailliúint inár ndiaidh. Is meabhrú dúinn é freisin go bhfuil scéalta na n-íobartach le hinsint agus le cloisteáil fós, agus gur gá dúinn freagra cuimsitheach a thabhairt dóibh.

Like colleagues on all sides of the House, I acknowledge the immense dignity and perseverance shown by the victims and families whose stories lie behind this report. They have carried unanswered questions and deep hurt for decades. Their courage is the foundation of the investigation that led to the publication of the report relating to Operation Kenova. They should and must be central to everything that is done in the work of legacy.

I welcome the publication of the report as a critical piece of work in bringing together findings across the reports on operations Kenova, Denton, Turma and Mizzenmast. As has been outlined, the investigators followed more than 12,000 lines of inquiry, interviewed hundreds of people and overcame major obstacles to uncover the truth. It was a huge effort and recognition is due to Jon Boucher, Iain Livingstone and the entire Operation Kenova team.

The report is unsparing in its assessment of the Provisional IRA's crimes, which include torture, inhumane and degrading treatment, murder and the intimidation of the very communities it claimed to represent. Accountability cannot differentiate, and nor can it be selective. Worryingly, the report also lays bare the deeply troubling failures of the British state, including MI5 and the Force Research Unit, whereby protecting its agent Stakeknife was repeatedly prioritised over preventing murder, intelligence was not shared with law enforcement on either side of the Border and the fact murders could and should have been prevented. Time and again, as the report states, the protection of Stakeknife outweighed the protection of innocent lives. This fact must be confronted honestly. It brings into focus one of the more horrific findings, which is that more lives were lost than saved because of the focus on protecting one agent whom, even now, the British Government declines to name.

We cannot ignore the important findings of Operation Mizzenmast and Operation Turma, including the forensic breakthroughs that have enabled justice to be done in a number of instances. Cases like these demonstrate clearly that truth can still be found and justice remains possible.

While the full report relating to Operation Denton has not been published, the summary provides some official recognition that a network of loyalist paramilitaries and corrupt members of the security forces were involved in activities during the Troubles. The corrosive impact of that collusion on confidence in policing and on victims' families cannot be overstated. It is deeply regrettable that the full Denton report has not yet been published. Survivors and families have waited far too long. This House has on three occasions sought access for an independent international judicial figure to all original British files relating to the 1974 Dublin-Monaghan bombings. I repeat the call in that regard today. Openness and accountability are not merely standards we demand of others; they are standards we must demonstrate ourselves.

The delay in the publication of the full Denton report is disappointing, and deeply so for the families affected. Its completion and release are necessary steps in advancing truth and honouring our obligations under the joint framework on the legacy of the Troubles agreed last year by the Irish and British Governments. Importantly, the framework recognises that cross-Border co-operation is essential. It commits both Governments to mechanisms that support

reconciliation, justice and truth. An Garda Síochána has played a role in assisting the Operation Kenova investigators, including with access to records and so on and in facilitating contact with witnesses and families. This is the model of co-operation that must continue.

This debate brings into focus the need for us to constantly think about how we can evolve the Good Friday Agreement. The discussions and setbacks we have seen in the area of legacy over the past few years have served as a reminder that the success of the agreement and its institutions is fragile, is ultimately predicated on the roles of the two Governments as co-guarantors and that they must both be aligned in their vision and their view of what the settlement should represent in terms of individual values.

That is why work on the joint framework on the legacy is an important step towards achieving that.

Ireland's commitment to peace has always rested on the principles of truth, justice, reconciliation and respect for the rule of law. Kenova adds to and mirrors those principles by shining a light where darkness was once allowed to spread, by confronting uncomfortable truths for all actors in the peace process, and by ensuring, most importantly, that victims and their families are not forgotten or silenced. Is cur chuige tábhachtach é seo a léiríonn an tábhachtach a bhaineann le héisteacht agus le cuimhniú ar gach rud atá tar éis tarlú d'íobartaigh le linn na Trioblóidí. Ní féidir le haon duine atá ainmnithe sa tuairisc seo éalú ón bhfreagra a gcaithfidh siad a thabhairt ar a bhfuil déanta acu nó ar a bhfuil déanta ag a gcuid eagraíochtaí féin. Operation Kenova demonstrates that even decades after crimes are committed, rigorous victim-focused investigations, while constituting immense effort and commitment from those involved, can deliver truth, acknowledgement and the possibility of closure. The work is painstaking and it can often be painful but it is work we must continue if we are sincere in our commitment to a lasting and just peace.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** The issue of the Operation Kenova report has gone on for ten years and at the core of it is the very concept that the British state broke the law and set out to break the law. I was just thinking earlier of Michael Davitt. He used to say the law was little more than another weapon in the government's arsenal to keep the lord in his mansion and the peasant in his place. It is very much the same thing here because the law clearly only applies to certain people and not to those who are the state operators in respect of all of this. The thousands of people who suffered as a consequence of the conflict are all too aware that the law was something that was there only for some - only for the select few. Certainly, for those who suffered so much at the hands of the people who were involved in all of this, not just our sympathies but our commitment has to be that truth can be restored. There has to be a pathway to do that.

The withdrawal of the British Government from the Stormont House Agreement and from many of the other agreements that were put in place after the Good Friday Agreement tells us there is a huge reluctance by the British state to actually engage meaningfully when it comes to truth and reconciliation. That is why we have to be very firm when it comes to understanding that both the Irish and British Governments are guarantors of that agreement and both have a role to play in it. When we examine these reports, they lay bare the reality of the collusion of the British state with agents it hired, paid, propagated and moved in and out through different parts of the conflict, always to its own benefit. They were always used to the benefit of the

British state. That is why we are in this situation and it continues to cover up that reality. It went to the very core of the British establishment. It went right to Whitehall. It was not some loose arrangement as they tried to push people out there to consider that was the way it happened. It did not happen that way. It went straight to the centre of Whitehall. It was a determination of British Government policy in Ireland to employ people to be able to undermine the legitimate causes that many people had to seek their freedom and their aspirations and to have equality and justice, including social justice, in their country. It undermined that and it propagated conflict and division.

The British state has now tried to cover that up. Even when we have an agreement and even when we are in a post-conflict situation, it continues to cover it up. The layers of cover-up are, in themselves, a crime against the many people who have been victims of this conflict.

I acknowledge progress is slow. We know that but the problem we have here is that the Irish Government is a guarantor of the agreement and has a role to play in ensuring all the parts of the agreement, including the parts which are about delivering truth and reconciliation to people, are actually delivered.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** To my mind, there is a direct line between the complicity and collusion of the British state and the British Empire with the genocide we have witnessed in Gaza over the past two years and the atrocities that were carried out by its agents, like Freddie Scappaticci committing murder, abducting people and so on while he was a British agent, through to Bloody Sunday and the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, and, if we want to, we can go right back and draw parallels with the role of the Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans during the Irish Revolution and the very same people being sent to Palestine to back to the Zionist move to partition Palestine. What is the common link? The link is the British Empire being involved in atrocity.

The republican movement has questions to answer for sure but I find it interesting that the Irish Government's entire focus in this debate seems to be to score political points against Sinn Féin rather than to be concerned about the profound implications of the fact that the British state was running an agent like Scappaticci who was involved in killing and abducting people. He was protected. The Kenova report reveals the British state's protection of him led to far more deaths than any it might have claimed he was saving by running an agent within the IRA. It still refuses to really own up to the truth of its involvement in all of this, or even to name Scappaticci, in the same way as the victims of the atrocity in Derry on Bloody Sunday are still fighting for justice. They still have not got the truth and accountability they demanded from the British state because it wants to guarantee impunity and to protect the people guilty of atrocities that its agents carry out.

Critically, in all of this, and this is the point I really want to make, while Operation Denton, the sort of subdivision of Kenova, is mentioned, there is far less focus from the Government on the fact that the Denton report has not been published. The families of the 34 victims of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings are absolutely furious about this because it was leaked in October two months before it was due to be published. Now, who leaked it? As a result of that, it has still not been published. We know the report indicates that the Dublin and Monaghan bombings - the single biggest atrocity - were carried out by loyalist paramilitaries with the collusion of the British state. The report dealing with that atrocity is still not published and

now is in limbo because it is subject to legal action because of the leak. That is why it has not been published when it was supposed to be published.

After years of investment the families put into that process, co-operating with Denton, they are now denied the truth and justice they have been seeking for decades. They have no idea now and are left in limbo as to whether they will ever get the truth, justice and accountability. The signs are that they are not going to because is that not the pattern we see? The families of the Bloody Sunday victims got no real truth and accountability. Nobody is ever really held accountable. The British Government still will not even admit the true extent of its involvement with Scappaticci and other atrocities or similarly with the Dublin and Monaghan bombings.

There are some very alarming things about this which I am surprised the Government does not highlight. The lawyers of the representatives of the victims of many of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings indicated that MI5 broke into the Denton headquarters while its review was being conducted. That is incredible. Even after all of this, after all of the atrocities, the collusion and the complicity with this kind of dirty tricks stuff, the report was leaked.

Who leaked it? Then we have MI5 trying to break into the headquarters of Denton, the body set up to do this. That is just shocking. No expressions of outrage or determination on the part of the Irish Government that we are going to get to the bottom of this. Who received the draft report of Denton? It was the PSNI and the Garda. From what I understand, families think it is unlikely that anybody in Denton leaked the report, so the only other two groups that saw the draft report were the Garda and the PSNI. It was leaked to the *Belfast Telegraph* two months before it was due to be published and a podcast went out from the *Belfast Telegraph* about it as well. As a result, the actual report has not been published. The families, who are fighting for truth and justice, are at the centre of all this. The Taoiseach said: "The Government has consistently called for a victim-centred approach to legacy issues." Where is the victim-centred approach to this? The families have no idea when they are going to actually see the report.

All the energy of the Government seems to be directed at scoring political points against Sinn Féin instead of at the British Government, the issue of the leaks and the lack of justice, truth and accountability for the victims of the single biggest atrocity, the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. I find it extraordinary. There is a pattern, however. With the crimes of the British State and British Empire, there is never accountability. There is always impunity, just like there is for Israel. We also see it here in the Irish State. Can the Irish State please explain to me, or is it even concerned about the fact, that the investigation into the Dublin and Monaghan bombings was shut down after 11 weeks? All of the forensic material relating to the Dublin bombing was sent North to be given to the PSNI when we now know the British were colluding with the loyalist paramilitaries that carried it out. We outsourced responsibility for investigating this to the jurisdiction that we now know was responsible for colluding with the people who carried out the atrocity.

The families seem to have a lot of faith in Denton. Whether that is justified or not, I do not know but even there, the investigation is essentially outsourced to another jurisdiction, rather than the Irish State itself taking responsibility for getting to the truth of these things. That leads to the Stardust issue today as well. What is at the heart of the anger that the Stardust families are expressing today is that a promise to engage with them on the process was reneged upon. There was a commitment to a second phase, to it not being a one-size-fits-all approach, to recognising the trauma and suffering and the State's responsibility in exacerbating that trauma

and suffering the families are still going through, and the Government managed to do it again. After all the years of fighting for truth, justice and so on, the State insults the Stardust families again with an announcement that reneges on commitments that were made to the families. It is really shocking.

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** It is positive to have these statements in the House. The publication of the final Operation Kenova report forces us all to confront some of the darkest and most painful chapters in our history. It is an extensive, detailed and deeply disturbing examination of violence, collusion, institutional failure and, above all, a prolonged denial of truth for victims and their families. This report lays bare the brutal reality of the Provisional IRA's campaign of terror. It documents in stark detail the abduction, torture and execution of individuals suspected of informing. These were barbaric crimes that devastate families and communities until this day. That reality has to be acknowledged honestly and without hesitation.

The report also exposes serious and deeply troubling failures by the British Government and its agencies. These are not minor administrative failings; they are failures that had life-and-death consequences. The findings surrounding the British Army agent known as Stakeknife are among the most shocking contained in this report. Kenova sets out how an individual strongly implicated in murder, torture and abduction was protected and facilitated by the British intelligence structures because he was considered a valuable asset. Intelligence was withheld. Opportunities to prevent killings were not taken. The report concludes that it is probable more lives were lost as a result of Stakeknife's continued operation than were saved. That is not just a simple historical controversy; it is fundamental moral and ethical failure by the British State. It lives on in communities like my own.

What is even more unacceptable is the continuing refusal of the British Government to formally confirm the identity of this agent. This refusal persists despite a clear public interest case and the overwhelming demands of victims' families. The continued reliance on the policy of "Neither confirm nor deny" in this context is not about national security; it is about protecting institutions and people from accountability. Victims and families are entitled to ask simple and legitimate questions. Who knew? What did they know? Why were they allowed to act with apparent impunity? Disclosures from State records have suggested that knowledge existed between policing and republican circles about the agent's alleged involvement in the murder of a neighbour of ours at home, Cooley farmer Tom Oliver, years before the information became public. For the Oliver family and others like them, such revelations are not just academic. They represent decades of withheld truth and deepened trauma.

The findings related to the Glenanne gang network are equally damning. The report confirms collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and members of the British security forces in what it describes as vicious and serious criminal activity, including bombings and murder. The collusion corroded confidence in policing and governance structures and inflicted profound and lasting harm. That network has been linked to atrocities including the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, attacks on Belturbet and Castleblayney and the bombing of Dundalk, the 50th anniversary of which was in December last. Communities in County Louth and across the Border region continue to live with the legacy of those attacks. The pain of the families has never been diminished. The absence of full truth has prolonged their suffering and will continue to prolong that suffering until answers are heard.

While the report states that it found no evidence of strategic state collusion in the Dublin-Monaghan bombings, the British Government still refuses to provide unrestricted access to all relevant documentation. That position is indefensible. Families have waited over 50 years. Any continued withholding of information cannot be justified by appeals to historical sensitivity or institutional protection. The Irish Government has consistently called for full disclosure through independent international judicial examination of all British-held records. That demand remains not only valid but absolutely urgent.

The Kenova report can also demonstrate that accountability is still possible. It shows clearly that justice can still be pursued. The principle is straightforward. It has to be absolute. There can be no immunity for those responsible for murder, regardless of the passage of time or the institutions involved. The joint framework on legacy agreed between the Irish and British Governments commits both states to reciprocal co-operation, transparency and meaningful information recovery. The credibility of that framework now depends heavily on the actions of the British and Irish Governments. Words and commitments are no longer enough. Victims and survivors require tangible evidence of openness and absolute accountability. This accountability is not easy for the Irish Government or the British Government, but if we are going to move on and have a peaceful reunified Ireland, we have to face up to the atrocities that happened across this island.

Addressing the legacy of the Troubles is not about opening the past. It remains open because truth has been denied for far too long and because communities like my own, on the Cooley Peninsula in north Louth, cannot move on with partial disclosure. We have to have full disclosure of information. This will be really difficult and hurtful but we have to face up to it. Operation Kenova has shown that independent investigation can uncover those uncomfortable truths.

It has exposed the cost of delay, secrecy and institutional self-protection. The British Government must now confront those findings honestly and demonstrate a genuine commitment to full transparency.

I ask the Minister to continue his work and stand firmly with those victims and the survivors, including families in Dundalk and north Louth, across County Louth and throughout this island. All they are asking for is truth, justice and for their loved ones to be remembered in the way they should be - for their life and not their death. They are not seeking vengeance; they are just seeking answers. After decades of waiting, those answers should not be withheld any longer.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** I issue a fíor fáilte do na daoine ó Limerick West and Croom Active Retirement Association. They are very welcome to the Dáil.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I express my sympathy and solidarity with all the families who lost loved ones and those who campaign to this day for truth and justice. My time is brief so it would be impossible to touch on all periods of the conflict in the North that cry out for answers. The British Government would have us believe that it was a neutral peacekeeping force in the North of Ireland, but we know the British Government's security services were involved in hundreds of targeted assassinations and murders of Irish citizens in a dirty war conducted by agents like Stakeknife. Kenova was hindered at every turn by MI5 and the security apparatus

of the British state, but it could not hide the truth that collusion was very real and went to the highest levels of the British state. Like Operation Denton, it exposes the criminality, collusion and cover-up that was the pattern of the British war in Ireland. Iain Livingstone is on public record as saying, "I can say categorically there was collusion. We know that to be true".

The families of those killed in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, the Miami Showband massacre in 1975 and other atrocities deserve the truth. The Irish Government must insist that all material evidence and other relevant information provided to and examined by Kenova, and other such operations, are now made available to the Irish authorities without further delay. I worked for years with Justice for the Forgotten, an organisation representing the families and survivors of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. We still do not have all the answers about what happened on 17 May 1974, when a car bomb went off in Monaghan and three others went off in Dublin city centre, one only a couple of hundred yards from where I now stand. The publication of the Kenova report does not draw a line under this period of our history. It only shows the need for greater transparency and accountability.

The absence of a truth commission at the heart of the peace process is the greatest obstacle to getting answers for those families. Republicans have never opposed this. Perhaps it is not too late for the British and Irish Governments to come together to form such a process. Who is blocking truth emerging? That is the big question we ask today. Who is blocking truth emerging? It is not republicans and the Irish Government says it is not it, so who is blocking truth about the conflict that happened in Ireland? We need a truth commission now. We called for it 20 years ago. Thirty years ago, people were talking about a truth commission emerging post conflict. That has not happened. It needs to happen if we are to move on.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I welcome Croom Active Retirement Association. It was a mystery tour they were on today. My mother-in-law is on it, so I am in big trouble because I never let her know where she was going. It just goes to show I can keep a secret.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** You might get a pass.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I might get a pass for this one. Well done to Croom Active Retirement Association. Among all the women who are here today, and there are over 30 of them, there is only one man. He is outnumbered, so he is a brave man. I welcome them and hope they have a fantastic tour.

We are here to talk about Kenova. We are here to talk about atrocities through our history, where collusion and cover-ups have caused devastation to families. What we have to do now is make sure there is accountability. In addition to accountability, families want full disclosure. No matter how horrific it is they want full disclosure now. They also want accountability from the people for when the collusion went on. We have seen that through collusion there were assassinations of people. It has gone on long enough now. People and families want full closure for their own families. They want to see the hypocrisy of cover-ups stop. We have seen cover-ups here in Ireland that went on for years upon years and how soul-destroying it is for people. Eventually, after tribunal after tribunal, things come out and people put up their hands and say sorry.

This has gone on over 50 years now and this is still going around in circles. I ask that the Irish and British Governments please give full disclosure. Full accountability is needed to make sure the remaining families get full disclosure. It would mean they could get closure, knowing that people did not die in vain. That is what it comes down to now. I ask the Minister to do whatever he can within his own strengths and powers, as well as the Government. We want closure for these people but to get closure, we need full disclosure for all the families.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** This is a really serious issue. It is an issue the Irish Government has not done the right thing on for a number of years. I will give a couple of reasons. There are three elements to all this. There is what has happened in the Troubles in relation to Irish citizens; what the role of the British state was in those actions; and what exactly the Irish Government did to make sure justice and truth were achieved for families. For years, we have known that families have been fighting for truth and justice in the North of Ireland. In many families now, the original generation has passed on and it is the children who have taken up the campaigns for truth and justice in the North of Ireland. Kenova has exposed, incredibly, the fact that British governments were behind much of the difficulties experienced in the dirty war in the North. The British did not just watch what happened. They were involved in what happened, they participated and they protected their agents who were involved in these actions.

Recently, we saw the legacy Act pass through Westminster under the Conservative Party. That legacy Act was the son and heir of the cover-ups that originally happened 30, 40 and 50 years ago, but it was worse because at least 30, 40 or 50 years ago the British Government tried to put blue water between itself, the actions and the cover-up. Now, it is the British Government itself authoring the cover-up of what happened. One of the big problems that exists in that legislation is it allows the British Secretary of State to prevent investigations and inquests. My problem here, and this is important so the Minister might just listen to this one bit of my speech if he can, is that is still in the new legislation. In the new legislation, which is a lot better than the previous legislation, the British Secretary of State can still, for national security reasons, prevent an investigation happening. If the Minister were in court, and another politician had the right to determine whether he had an investigation into what happened, he would be frustrated, he would feel it was wrong and he would say it was not justice.

It cannot be allowed that the current legacy Bill going through Westminster will leave a British politician to make a decision over whether there is an investigation. It is not that we do not know what the likely outcome is going to be because the British Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, has already gone to court numerous times to stop an investigation or inquiry into the murder of Sean Brown. The Brown family have been in and out of court, dozens of times at this stage, trying to get an inquiry into what happened to Sean Brown outside Bellaghy football club in the nineties.

*3 o'clock*

Yet, now the family has to traipse over to the supreme court in London to fight their case to see if they can get justice. To create legislation that gives a right to a British secretary of state to say "No" to an investigation, when we know this particular individual has already said "No" to investigations, is wrong. This legislation stems from the joint framework document, which is an agreement between the Irish and British Governments. If it proceeds in the manner in which it is going, it will be damaging. I was in Washington DC recently where I spoke to six

congressmen and women from the Republican and Democratic Parties about this and they agreed that is a problem with this legislation.

There are also concerns about what protections will be given to British army veterans. If those protections are simply that an elderly individual gives evidence at a distance in an electronic format, I do not think people will have difficulty with them. However, we must remember a big section of the British media and political establishment wants to protect their veterans. I saw the Tories came out recently and said there should not be any case where their veterans are prosecuted. We are only looking for the guilty ones to be prosecuted. We do not want the innocent ones to be prosecuted. There is a problem, in that the Irish Government has let the British Government away with this on many occasions. I am thinking about the Glenanne gang especially. The Glenanne gang and British security forces were involved in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, the biggest loss of life of the Troubles, which unfolded close to where we are at the moment. In the subsequent investigation in this State, forensics were sent North and disappeared, files went missing and the investigation was closed within ten weeks. Motions have been passed a number of times in this House demanding the British Government make the necessary files on this available and it has refused to do so. Denise Mullen is a former Aontú councillor from Dungannon. At the age of four, she stood at her house while her father was shot dead by the Glenanne gang and the east brigade of the Tyrone UVF. Her father bled out over hours while she was with him. The O'Dowd brothers live beside me in County Meath. Members of their family were murdered by the Glenanne gang.

There is an instinct, especially on the part of the Minister's party leader at times, to focus on IRA actions rather than British actions. At times, there is more political benefit in the coffins created by the IRA than those created by the British Government and that is wrong. There should be no difference between victims of the Troubles

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Go raibh maith agat.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** All Troubles victims should be fought for equally.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I welcome the publication of the final report of Operation Kenova. It brings me back to a different time many years ago when I was a younger man and became aware of collusion suggestions, British spy networks in the North and the report by former inspector John Stalker, whom the younger generation may not remember. It is worth using search engines to see the work he did, how that work was impeded and the resulting measures that were taken. In summary, in 1986, just before John Stalker, who was chief constable of Manchester police - he was not an inspector - was to make his final report on the issues I just mentioned, he was removed from his position in charge of the inquiry he led. That was in June. Later in June, he was suspended from duty over allegations of associating with criminals. Shortly afterwards, in August, he was cleared of those allegations and returned to duty, but critically he was not reinstated as head of the inquiry he was removed from. That inquiry was taken over by Colin Sampson of West Yorkshire Police and its findings were never made public. One cannot help but think of the words of de Valera in response to Churchill at the end of the war when he said that, more than occasionally in our history, there has been a danger that Britain's necessity would become a moral code.

I will not get knee deep in or wade into issues that are sensitive, but I will make one point. In the contemporary climate where the country and the Government need to engage seriously on topics of defence and national security, there has to be a sensitivity that the words "defence" and "security" have a completely different resonance in the Republic of Ireland than they may have in the Six Counties. The Kenova report demonstrates exactly why that is the case. There are lingering suspicions and lingering mistrust, there are a number of unfinished chapters in the history of the relationship between the two islands and plenty of unfinished business needs to be undertaken. There is nothing particularly radical, dramatic or hyperbolic in that statement.

Returning to the report in hand, for those who might be watching and wondering, as some of my staff were this morning, what was Operation Kenova, we know it covered a number of operations. It was a group of independent investigations from about 2016 into Troubles-related murders, torture, kidnappings and alleged collusion involving paramilitaries and British state actors. It can be seen as an umbrella for four investigations, namely, Operation Kenova, Operation Denton, Operation Turma and Operation Mizzenmast. The essential summary points of these four investigations were as follows. Operation Kenova looked at the actions of Stakeknife - it is a name we all grew up with but younger people might not be familiar with it - a British agent in the internal security unit of the Provisional IRA. Its focus was on whether murders and torture were allowed in order to protect the agent. The report of Operation Kenova contains strong criticism of the IRA's use of intimidation and violence.

Operation Denton looked into the activities of the Glenanne Gang. It reviewed killings by a loyalist network involving UVF, RUC and UDR members. When reading these things, it strikes me that these acronyms are probably completely alien to a modern audience, yet we grew up listening to them every day on every news network. That is a tribute to all those who engaged in bringing and building peace and persuading others of the need for peace. These reports look at some of the unfinished business of that process. The Glenanne Gang was believed to have been responsible for up to 120 murders, including the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. This operation report confirms serious collusion and intelligence-sharing by security forces. No evidence of political level collusion was found. There was no evidence of British state involvement in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, although it has not been definitively excluded, which is a critical point.

Operation Turma was an investigation into the 1982 murder of three RUC officers. It led to a prosecution and an extradition this year. The key point arising from that is that, in some cases, historic prosecutions remain possible. Operation Mizzenmast examined the 1972 killing of Jean Smyth-Campbell and alleged failures in the original investigation. It highlighted long-standing issues with how certain killings were handled by the security forces.

Operation Kenova allows us another layer of acknowledgement of harm and suffering that was visited on people on both sides, particularly the traumas faced by victims and families across all communities. That is recognised. Forgive me, a Chathaoirleach Gníomhach. I did not realise there was a second Government speaker, so I will wrap up on that. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach might allow a bit more time.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** We will.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** I commend the authors and investigators of Kenova. The report has been a long time coming. Many families have waited on this. Much was banking on it. This report once again shows the depth of the brutality and callousness to which innocent people and communities were subjected during the Troubles. The scars, some of which are obvious and some of which are not, will be carried for generations. These acts were neither justified nor justifiable, whether committed by paramilitaries or members of the security forces, whether they wore a uniform or not. The report finds collusion involved vicious and serious criminal activity, including bombings and murder, and that paramilitary groups were regularly supplied with intelligence by members of the security forces. It also confirms, as noted in the interim report, that the Provisional IRA engaged in the wanton use of torture and murder. We are talking about murder, torture, kidnapping and extreme violence.

The human cost of these crimes can never be overstated. The approach to legacy in recent years has damaged confidence in the rule of law in Northern Ireland. The rule of law was integral to the work of the Good Friday Agreement and after it to set up institutions. We always have to be on the side of the rule of law. Until truth and accountability are prioritised over protecting perpetrators, we cannot genuinely move forward as a society and build reconciliation.

Kenova has been the light amidst the dark in recent years. It is designed as a full criminal standard investigation that has won the trust of victims. Kenova has emphasised that the report should be a blueprint for future legacy work and I agree. It has shown clearly that no organisation responsible for killing should be able to block a victim's pathway to truth and justice. The UK Parliament's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee said strongly this week that it recommends that the British Government formally identify Stakeknife. I wholeheartedly agree. It is appropriate, proportionate and in the public interest, and it shows that no one can expect to be protected in their actions.

We are always coming back to a place of national vetoes on information and we need maximum disclosure and for all parties to be willing to stand for truth, to be brave enough to give truth to victims' families and to assist in reconciliation. We do not need a framework for paramilitaries to come forward and provide information to families; they could be doing that.

I always want to finish with my connection to the McVeigh family in Donaghmore and to Columba, who has been missing for 50 years. That family is not looking for revenge. They just want to bring Columba home and bury him in my village of Donaghmore. They had another dig this summer and it was unsuccessful. I urge once again that anyone who stands up in this Chamber or anywhere else who talks about truth, accountability, the rule of law and justice for families remembers families like the McVeighs. I sincerely hope that we can build a framework and system of justice and truth for families.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I want to state clearly that we absolutely need truth and reconciliation for all of our people who came through the conflict, but one huge missing piece is the role of the British state. I want to take the Minister through the assassination of an elected representative in this State. Councillor Eddie Fullerton was assassinated in May 1991. His family pursued a justice campaign for many years, patiently and determinedly. That led to Operation Greenwich, which was published by the Police Ombudsman in the North in January 2022. It took so long because the investigators in the ombudsman's office had uncovered a

much wider conspiracy than just the assassination of Councillor Eddie Fullerton. It is absolutely clear now that British military agents were directly involved in the assassination of Councillor Eddie Fullerton. At least two British military agents would have killed Eddie and I believe another was present in the operation. They did not just kill Eddie Fullerton. They killed Councillor Bernard O'Hagan. They killed Sinn Féin members and republican leaders across Donegal, in the case of Councillor Eddie Fullerton, County Derry, County Antrim and west Tyrone, in a period of just over four years.

I want the Minister to pay close attention to what I am about to say to him about one man in particular because we have not talked about this before one-to-one. I have raised it with all the Minister's predecessors. In the Operation Greenwich report, please note Person K. I am clear that I may name him in this place at some stage. Person K was a British military agent who was overseeing the operation where Councillor Eddie Fullerton was assassinated. He oversaw the murders of 17 people and the attempted murders of seven. Up until the Greysteel massacre, he was a useful agent for the British in that he killed Sinn Féin members, Sinn Féin elected representatives and republican leaders, but in Greysteel, he went solo. He totally oversaw the operation. We have a situation where the man who drove the car named Person K. The man who gave the weapons to the RUC afterwards named Person K. Person K's fingerprints were on the weapons used in the Greysteel massacre, yet Person K was never charged because Person K was a British military agent. Even after the Greysteel massacre, he was not dealt with.

If you look at the end of that report from January 2022, this was reported to the PSNI. At the end of that report, the Police Ombudsman's office confirms that it passed this file over to the PSNI in 2016. Ten years later, I want to know what the PSNI has done about the actions of Person K. Some day, I will name Person K in this Chamber. I challenge the Minister to get those answers. How did this man get away with all of that?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I too am glad to speak on the Kenova report. I compliment the people who researched and presented it. We have had a long history here as well as in the North of Ireland and the UK. We are not so squeaky clean here. I compliment the Minister. Since he came into the Department of justice, he seems to have been making stellar efforts to have a more hands-on, open, honest and transparent approach, which is badly needed.

The Sean Brown case was mentioned, which was so sad because Sean Brown, to everybody's knowledge, had nothing to do with any political party but was a GAA man through and through. He was out locking up his GAA club, as many volunteers across the Thirty-two Counties do. It is our national game. He was so cruelly executed. If we have legislation here as a result of this or in the future, we cannot possibly have a situation like that under the UK legislation, which gives the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland a veto on what can be debated, discussed or raised. That cannot happen. We know there is a murky past since the time of the War of Independence and Civil War, and indeed long before that. One could go back to the Famine. There are all these cases. I think of The Miami Showband. Some of them were from Carrick-on-Suir in my own constituency. There was a vicious assassination attempt on a group that was giving entertainment to all people.

I have been in Donaghmore in Tyrone many times. Deputy Currie mentioned her own case there. That should be sorted. There are too many cases where too much trauma and anguish

have been bestowed on families. I remember a case in Aughnacloy involving another young man who was just going to work in a town in Monaghan walking through a checkpoint. The name eludes me but the story told was that a British soldier's rifle slipped because it was a wet day and the bullet ricocheted off the ground. This was an absurd lie. A gentleman worked with my sister-in-law and brother-in-law in a meat factory in Monaghan at the time and was harassed every day going up and down through the Border point at Aughnacloy. I passed through that Border point hundreds of times myself. It has affected so many others as well. There is also the case of the Dublin-Monaghan bombs and the Glenanne gang. I happened to be in Dublin on that particular day on a school tour. That was a scary event. There has been no truth on that either. The Omagh bombing, on which the Minister and I differed in opinion a number of times, was an atrocity. I was on my way to Omagh that day and I got there the morning after when there such devastation. I worked closely with Michael Gallagher and others over the years and they are fighting for justice as well.

I know the Minister has moved the case affecting Lucia Farrell on. It has nothing to do with paramilitarism but what happened to her son Shane, who went out for a cycle, was a travesty of injustice. The driver of that car and his accomplices had numerous custodial sentences hanging over them, were stopped at a Garda checkpoint and should not have been allowed to go on. We saw the battle that Lucia Farrell has had on her hands to try and get justice for her lovely son, who was swept away unceremoniously.

I welcome a group from Coláiste Dún Iascaigh in Cahir to the Public Gallery. I hope they enjoy their trip to the Dáil and Dublin.

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** I thank all the Deputies who contributed. It is important at the outset to ask what the purpose of legacy is and what the purpose of Denton and Kenova, which we are discussing today, was. The purpose is to provide answers for families that never got justice and whose family members were killed in brutal circumstances in what everyone can agree was a dirty war on the part of everyone who participated in it. That is the purpose of legacy. There is a further purpose, which is to try to improve and enhance reconciliation so that there can be greater understanding between communities who, to be blunt, were involved in a bloody sectarian campaign and conflict that took place in Northern Ireland for 30 years. That is the purpose of legacy. There is a legitimate objective and political purpose why politicians and governments are seeking to pursue investigations into the past so we can get answers for loved ones who have not been provided with answers today

What is the danger of legacy? The danger of legacy is that we just use legacy for our own narrow political purposes. We cannot do that. If we are going to allow the past to be the territory on which the modern conflict is contested, there is no point in having any involvement in the legacy process. Regrettably, it is the case that we do allow the past to be used for our own political purposes. I always listen to Deputy Mac Lochlainn. I mean that. I always listen to him because I think he has very strong contributions to make. Maybe it was just because that he was the last speaker prior to the Acting Chairman but as an example of legacy, Deputy Mac Lochlainn referred to the outrageous murder of Eddie Fullerton, who was an elected politician. We need to remember as well that other politicians such as Robert Bradford and Billy Fox were also murdered. If we are going to have legacy and if it is going to work effectively, we cannot just decide individually that it suits my political agenda to refer to some

legacy crimes from the past and not mention others. We need to have a much broader perspective of what is involved in legacy. What will be really difficult is people politically getting behind legacy inquiries into areas that make them feel uncomfortable.

I am here as the representative of the Irish Government and I have to answer for the Irish Government. When I have had meetings with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I refer to his responsibility and the fact that he has answers that would be of benefit to people who were victims in Dublin and Monaghan. We have to be able to recognise that the political representatives of the Provisional IRA are Sinn Féin. That is not a party political point; that is a fact. In terms of trying to get answers for the actions of the Provisional IRA and for the crimes that were committed by the Provisional IRA, Sinn Féin has to answer that in the same way as I answer on behalf of the Irish Government or indeed Hilary Benn has to answer on behalf of the British Government. I listened very carefully to the leader of Sinn Féin. She said she was sorry. She said she was sorry for all the lives lost. I presume, interpret and hope it means that she is apologising for the murders perpetrated by the Provisional IRA. If that is so, it is a positive development. We need to move on from our comfort zones in respect of our legacy.

I have been in discussions with the British Government in terms of trying to get agreement on the legacy framework. It is extremely difficult. I heard Deputy Tóibín say earlier that we should not allow the British Government to introduce legislation that enables X, Y or Z. Obviously, neither I nor anyone else in this House can control the legislation that is enacted in the British Parliament, just as the British cannot control the legislation that is enacted here. However, I can tell the House that the opportunity that exists at present for a real and thorough legacy inquiry is much better now than it was with the previous British Government and we need to avail of this opportunity.

We also need to recognise that when it comes to investigating the past, the passage of time affects it. This is what is so painful for the families involved in this who have experienced the lack of justice for 30 or more years. When I meet the families of victims, I try to be honest and straight with them and say that, on many occasions, people do not get the justice that they deserve or the justice they want. In most cases relating to the atrocities and murders perpetrated in the past in Northern Ireland, the ones that have not been solved to date, where people have not been brought to the courts, the likelihood is that they will not be brought to justice. That does not diminish the benefit that can come from inquiries and investigations. We saw that with regard to Kenova in respect of Freddie Scappaticci. I read Kenova and I also read Richard O'Rawe's book. It is an horrific example of how lives were viewed as being so dispensable and so unimportant that people were able to allow Freddie Scappaticci to kill in such a relaxed way that it was not an issue. I criticised the British Government for allowing that and I criticised the Provisional IRA for being the parties that were colluding in the murders that were perpetrated by Freddie Scappaticci.

When we are dealing with legacy, we have to be able to speak truthfully about issues. I know everyone comes to every debate with their own political objective but there will be no resolution of the legacy issue unless people are prepared to take on board uncomfortable truths and people are prepared to look to see that the entity they represent has answers to give in respect of this matter.

In my engagement with victims and families in Troubles-related cases, they have told me that they feel time is running out for them and they are looking for truth and accountability.

The reality is that, in many instances, the information that is available will not be retained in a document, on a written piece of paper or in files that will be handed over. It is available to people who are still alive and who are still involved in it. That is why we all have to try to play our role in urging people who have information to give that information and bring it forward. There are people in the North who have information and could provide assistance in terms of truth and reconciliation. We may not have yet provided that forum where that can happen. There are many people trying to think of mechanisms for it to be provided, but I would have thought that the last show in town is the legacy framework that at present is being worked on by the British Government and in respect of which I also will be bringing forward legislation again. I intend to bring forward legislation in this House to give effect to the responsibilities that will lie upon this State.

I accept my responsibility. Others have to accept theirs and encourage others who have information to come forward with it. An Garda Síochána has established a unit as is required for the investigations of Troubles-related incidents. The Commissioner has been centrally involved in putting that in place. We need to ensure that where we can have investigations, those investigations take place.

If we are going to allow legacy to be simply another battleground on which the green and orange politics of Northern Ireland are fought, we might as well give up. It is of no benefit to anyone because it will all be about whataboutery. We have to acknowledge our responsibility. Everyone in this House has a responsibility. Some have greater responsibilities than others in terms of what happened in the past and we cannot run away from the responsibility for the terrible things that were done on this island for a period of 30 years.

When you look back on it, you wonder what it was all about. To get to the Good Friday Agreement? We did not need thousands of people to be killed to get to the Good Friday Agreement. It is depressing. I know it is hard for people who were involved in the violence to ask that question: what was it all about? It is a question that maybe does not need to be answered, but, ultimately, if we want to move on and try to achieve some form of reconciliation and unity, we are going to have to look at this in a more selfless way and stop trying to just advance our own interests.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** That was a very interesting contribution. It is a good day to welcome the transition year students from Coláiste Dún Iascaigh in Cahir and their teachers Rachel Burke and Anne Hickey. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 3.33 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.34 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 3.33 p.m. and resumed at 4.34 p.m.*

### **Defamation (Amendment) Bill 2024: From the Seanad**

The Dáil went into Committee to consider amendments from the Seanad.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seanad amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 1:

Section 11: In page 10, line 4, to delete “**Publication**” and substitute “**Fair publication**”.

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan):** I will say a few brief words. I am back, a Cheann Comhairle, from a lengthy sojourn in the Seanad, which I have to say was interesting and productive. I think I was in the Seanad for over 28 hours on Committee and Report Stages but it was a worthwhile engagement. As a result of the contributions from Senators in the House, I am coming here with five amendments to the legislation.

Amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, are changes to section 11 of the Bill, which, as colleagues will know, were substantive changes to section 26 of the original Act. It was introduced on Report Stage in this House to amend section 26 of the 2009 Act by providing for a simpler and more concise defence of publication on a matter of public interest. Concerns were raised in Seanad Éireann that section 11 removed the important element of “fairness” from the defence of fair and reasonable publication. Amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, respond to those concerns.

Amendment No. 3 places the concept of fairness front and centre of the defence and clarifies that in order to avail of the defence, the publication must be fair in all the circumstances of the case. It goes on to set out that this will only occur where the publication can objectively be considered in the public interest and where the publisher, acting in good faith, reasonably believed this to be the case having conducted appropriate checks and inquiries. Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 alter the title of the amended defence to make it clear that fairness is a key element of the defence.

The amendments seek to balance the concerns expressed in the Seanad with concerns raised during the review of the 2009 Act that the application of an entirely separate test of fairness and reasonableness in the existing section 26 defence was overly complex.

I recommend that the House accepts these three amendments.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Are there any Members wishing to contribute? I call Deputy Mark Ward.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** Sinn Féin will be supporting the Minister's amendments from the Seanad, which are largely technical, as well as the amendment that explicitly clarifies the defence of live broadcasts. We will, however, be opposing the Bill itself.

While the Bill contains important provisions with regard to strategic lawsuits against public participation, SLAPPs, for example, and Sinn Féin remains willing to engage constructively with the Minister in relation to defamation reform or any other matter, we oppose the removal of juries from defamation trials. It is unnecessary, given the outworkings of the Higgins case.

That said, I express significant disappointment in regard to how the Minister has progressed this Bill. Government Ministers commonly talk about being willing to work with the

Opposition, asking what the Opposition's ideas are and asking us to bring forward solutions. Sinn Féin has brought forward multiple proposals that would have tempered the wholesale removal of juries. So, too, did other Opposition parties and Independents in both the Dáil and the Seanad. In particular, one amendment in the Seanad would have effectively aligned the law on mode of trial with that of the North, unifying the law on this issue for the whole island. That would have added benefit that should have been given greater consideration.

Distinct from this, we also brought forward amendments touching on other parts of the Bill following significant deliberations in both Houses. It is, therefore, incredibly disappointing that what we see returning from the Seanad is the Minister's acceptance of just one amendment, bringing explicit clarity to an existing provision. That, to my mind, does not reflect a Minister who is genuinely interested in hearing from the Opposition and good legislative practice, or give due respect to the function of these Houses in their totality.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** We will not be opposing any of the Minister's amendments as they are broadly technical but I have to say, it is a huge pity he does not practice what he preaches in relation to this Bill. He was on the total opposite of this debate when he was sitting in a different part of this Chamber - with Government but against it. Once the Minister got the seal of office, he changed tack totally and that is a fact. We can read the record.

A paper that is read a lot more in the Minister's constituency than in mine is *The Irish Times*. The former head of the civil juries division of the High Court, the former judge, Mr. Justice Bernard Barton, has written in the paper today. I am sure the Minister has read it or it has been brought to his attention. Getting rid of the process by which these trials are done by jury has no basis really from what the concern was. We are stripping the litigant of the right to choose the mode of trial by which the facts of the action are to be decided and also striking down the fundamental principle at the heart of our legal system by removing the jury. This requirement for fairness in law and the use of juries is as old as justice itself but for some reason, despite the Minister's own personal views not that long ago, his current views are completely contradictory. The Minister calls it compromise.

I would prefer it if the Minister had conviction and stood by what he actually believes in. There is a deeper concern as to his conviction and why he does not stand by what he believes in, particularly as he is the Minister for justice. A Minister without conviction holding that portfolio is deeply worrying and troubling. The Minister has stated on the record of this House that he is of a completely different view.

The explanation for continuing with and justifying this is even more bizarre, particularly when we consider that the justice committee unanimously went against it and that the premise set out in the Department of justice's report on which the abolition is founded was swept away by Supreme Court's decision in the Higgins case in 2022. I do not know why the Minister is under so much pressure in his Department or within Government to continue going down this road. This is the last opportunity for him to change what is involved here. This is a step in the wrong direction. The Minister is not doing or is not pushing for the right thing. Unfortunately, that says an awful lot about him as a Minister. He was vehemently opposed to this previously, but now, despite the Supreme Court's decision in 2022, he is bringing it in. That is an issue for me when it comes to his conviction as Minister. If that is going to be the mark of his Ministry, then it gives rise to concerns in respect of a number of matters beyond this Bill.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** One of the disadvantages of being a small party is that it is not possible to follow every piece of legislation. However, I did speak against this Bill earlier. I am taking time to speak against it again because it strikes at the heart of a basic principle of justice, which is the right of people to have serious matters that impinge on them judged by a jury of their peers. That is a fundamental basic principle of law. To undermine it, without any real explanation or justification, is extremely worrying. That is what is happening here. People do not follow these things, which is understandable. They may seem quite technical to them.

Deputy Kelly referred to Judge Bernard Barton. I thank the Deputy for briefing me to some degree on this and for highlighting why it is such a problem. The fact that anyone who is seriously concerned with the administration of justice, including the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, those who represent the legal profession and even the Minister, when he was in opposition - which I did not know – have opposed this kind of says it all. Now, however, it is going to be pushed through.

I would be curious to know if the Minister has any justification for this. Think about it. For those who might be watching these proceedings, what we are discussing here relates to someone who is defamed and who takes a case because their good name and reputation is being taken from them. In such circumstances, a person's right to have a case on whether their good name and reputation has been taken heard by a jury of their peers will be decided by one individual, namely a judge. If we are talking about somebody's good name and reputation, then who better to judge that than a group of their peers – 12 of their peers rather than just one individual – because they are surely in a far better position to assess whether someone's reputation and good name have been damaged and whether what has been done in that regard was fair or not? Surely a jury of one's peers is the ideal group to assess whether that is the case rather than a judge who, even if they are the best judge in the world, is just one individual who inevitably only represents a particular section of society. I do not think Bernard Barton would disagree with me when I say that even the best judges cannot be said to represent the broad spectrum of society. The chances that a jury might do that are far greater. That is the whole point of juries. They are supposed to represent a broad spectrum of society. Judges, even the best of them, cannot do that. So why is the Government doing what is proposed here?

A claim was put forward to the effect that this has to do with disproportionate awards that were being given out. That has already been dealt with, because the changes made since the Supreme Court's decision in 2022-----

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Yes.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----mean that some guidance has being given in that area. In any event, I just do not see how replacing juries in the context of making these decisions, even when it comes to the awards people might get if their good name and reputation have been taken, with a single individual, namely a judge, can be a good thing. The only plausible explanation - it would be interesting to know if this is the case - is that those who own the big media outlets want what is being proposed.

Let us be honest, sensational comments about people that may veer into the area of being defamatory or slanderous sell newspapers. They can go further when it comes to the algorithms

used by certain social media outlets for that matter. It is not that I want to infringe on free speech – I genuinely do not – but somebody does have to judge whether a line has been crossed and whether something is completely wrong, unfair, baseless, slanderous, defamatory and has taken away someone's good name and character. Given the choice between an individual judge and a representative body of one's peers, I know which I think is fairer. This is elementary in the justice system. That is true about other things as well, including serious criminal matters. Is it just that the Government is dancing to the tune of the owners of the media outlets and flying in the face of what should really be an elementary legal principle of the justice system? It seems that is what the Minister is doing. I want to flag that I believe this is fundamentally wrong and that we will be voting against it. I am curious to hear why the Minister's *volte face* happened and how the Government is going to justify it.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank my three colleagues for their contributions. I also thank them for their support regarding the amendments that have been brought here from the Seanad. All three spoke about juries. I will deal with that matter presently. Before I do, I would not like people to think that the primary functions of this Bill are all to do with the abolition of High Court juries. There is much more to the Bill than that, as I am sure colleagues are aware.

There are two areas that deserve recognition and attention. I will mention them briefly. They are the amendment to section 26 and the provision of a new defence for retailers. Third is the provision to enable someone to go to the Circuit Court to get an identification order against a social media company that has published information about them that is defamatory but where the identity of the person is hidden. These are significant developments that will assist individuals who have been defamed and who want to get access to the identity of those who have defamed them.

Most defamation that takes place in Ireland, as I am sure my friends would agree, happens online by unidentified persons who defame people by means of social media platforms. At present, in order to establish the identity of the defamer, you have to go to the High Court to get a Norwich Pharmacal order to get the social media company to identify the person behind it. As a result of the provision being introduced here, there will now be a straightforward statutory procedure that will enable people to go before the Circuit Court.

I think all colleagues will welcome that.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Agreed.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** Section 26 has not operated in the way we wanted it to when it was enacted by the previous Oireachtas back in 2009. I think this will benefit it. What I am putting in will make sure it is fair, as well as reasonable. Regarding the retailers, there is a specific section that puts in place what was previously a form of qualified privilege where they had to stop somebody and ask them whether or not they had paid for goods in circumstances where they had not.

What everyone wants to hear about is the abolition of juries in the High Court. I would point out that if you take a Circuit Court action for defamation, you do not get a jury. The principle in respect of juries is that, since 1988, they are increasingly being removed from civil actions. It used to be the case, in the early 1980s, that when someone had a personal injury

action in Ireland, they had an entitlement to a jury. We got rid of that on the grounds of efficiency and to speed up the process. Unquestionably, it is the case that one of the advantages or consequences of not having a jury in a case is that the trial will be expedited, and we get a solution much faster.

Deputy Kelly wants to know why it is that I did-----

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Why did the Minister change his mind?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I am going to tell him exactly that. I answered it here before. First, when you go into government, or if you are a member of a political party, as the Deputy knows, you sometimes have to go along with things you probably do not agree with.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** So the Minister is bringing in legislation he does not agree with.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** The Deputy has to let me speak.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Order, please. Deputy Kelly has made his contribution.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** The Labour Party put forward a candidate in the last Presidential election. Deputy Kelly did not agree with it. He did not run off and resign from the Labour Party. He expressed his opinion and made it known but he got on with it and rowed in. That is one of the consequences of being a member of a political party, and more so, being a member of a government. It was a Government decision that was made in the programme for Government that the Defamation (Amendment) Bill, which was commenced before I became a Minister, would be progressed and enacted. That is why.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** You do not agree with it.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I am sorry. The Deputy asked about my conviction. It is not a point upon which I am prepared to die in a ditch.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** That is fair enough.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** It is not the most significant change that I am going to be introducing as a Minister, to be frank with the Deputy. When we look at it, it is removing juries from the High Court in defamation actions. There is no right. I was listening to Deputy Boyd Barrett, who very carefully used his language. I was waiting for him to say it is a right, and in fairness, he did not - he said it is a principle. It is not a right to have a jury in a civil action. It is a principle that had developed but which has gradually been removed on the grounds of efficiency. There is a basis upon which the Government wants to remove juries from defamation actions. There is an understandable basis as to why that is happening.

What it will mean in practice is that people will have a greater awareness as to the likely award in a defamation action. If somebody defames Deputy Kelly, Deputy Boyd Barrett or Deputy Ward, and it is a bad defamation, and they go to a lawyer and ask what a court will

award them, it is very difficult to advise them what will be awarded if they go before a High Court jury. It depends on what a jury will assess as being the appropriate value. I know that in the Higgins case, the Supreme Court set out what the values should be but from a jury's perspective, it is very hard to advise someone as to the potential liability. If somebody is being sued, it is hard to assess or tell them the potential pitfalls of the case.

There are now to be judge-only determinations. I am aware there are negative consequences to that. There will be positive consequences but, of course, there will be negative consequences as well. However, if there is judge-made law in respect of this area, we will see greater consistency and a greater ability to determine what is the likelihood of an award.

It is the case, by the way, that in the Circuit Court people can get damages of up to €65,000 or €75,000 in a defamation case. A lot of people go for defamation cases in the Circuit Court, mainly because it is more predictable. There is uncertainty if someone goes before a jury of 12 because they do not really know what the outcome is going to be. A point that has been made is that there is certainly a very strong authority to a jury award, and they are very hard to overturn. What we are going to find now is that there will be a lot of recorded and reserved judgments in defamation actions. If we look through the law reports at present, we will not find High Court decisions on defamation actions in general. They are all, like criminal cases, determinations by a jury, so we just see the award of the jury report in a newspaper. Sometimes, we will see an assessment of a defamation case if it goes to appeal.

From now on, however, we will see a body of law being developed, and written judgments by judges setting out why the plaintiff was entitled to €100,000, or whatever the sum is, for being defamed. It will develop a body of law which, in itself, I would have thought is a positive development, as opposed to the unpredictability.

To come back to the Deputy's point, the reason I have changed my mind-----

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** The reason I am here advocating this is that politics, as Deputy Kelly well knows, is about compromise. Deputy Boyd Barrett said at the outset that there are disadvantages to being in a smaller party. That is true because you cannot cover everything. However, there are some great advantages to being in a small party, and there are some real advantages to being an Independent - you never have to compromise.

They are the answers. I know the Deputies will not accept them but I thank them for supporting the amendments.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Kelly now has the opportunity to respond.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** No, we have said our bit.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** As no Deputies are offering, I thank the Minister. We will put the amendment.

Amendment put:

| The Committee divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 66; Staon, 0. |                           |       |
|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                                | Níl                       | Staon |
| Aird, William.                                    | Ahern, Ciarán.            |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                                | Bacik, Ivana.             |       |
| Boland, Grace.                                    | Bennett, Cathy.           |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                                    | Boyd Barrett, Richard.    |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                                   | Brady, John.              |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                                    | Buckley, Pat.             |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                     | Byrne, Joanna.            |       |
| Browne, James.                                    | Carthy, Matt.             |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                      | Clarke, Sorca.            |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                     | Collins, Michael.         |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                                  | Coppinger, Ruth.          |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                                  | Cronin, Réada.            |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                                   | Crowe, Seán.              |       |
| Cahill, Michael.                                  | Cullinane, David.         |       |
| Callaghan, Catherine.                             | Cummins, Jen.             |       |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.                       | Daly, Pa.                 |       |
| Chambers, Jack.                                   | Devine, Máire.            |       |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.                             | Doherty, Pearse.          |       |
| Clendennen, John.                                 | Donnelly, Paul.           |       |
| Collins, Niall.                                   | Ellis, Dessie.            |       |
| Connolly, John.                                   | Farrelly, Aidan.          |       |
| Cooney, Joe.                                      | Fitzmaurice, Michael.     |       |
| Cummins, John.                                    | Gannon, Gary.             |       |
| Currie, Emer.                                     | Gibney, Sinéad.           |       |
| Daly, Martin.                                     | Graves, Ann.              |       |
| Dempsey, Aisling.                                 | Guirke, Johnny.           |       |
| Dillon, Alan.                                     | Hayes, Eoin.              |       |
| Dolan, Albert.                                    | Healy, Seamus.            |       |
| Feighan, Frankie.                                 | Hearne, Rory.             |       |
| Fleming, Sean.                                    | Kelly, Alan.              |       |
| Foley, Norma.                                     | Kenny, Eoghan.            |       |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.                          | Kenny, Martin.            |       |
| Geoghegan, James.                                 | Kerrane, Claire.          |       |
| Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.                           | Lawless, Paul.            |       |
| Grealish, Noel.                                   | Lawlor, George.           |       |
| Harkin, Marian.                                   | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.   |       |
| Healy-Rae, Danny.                                 | McGettigan, Donna.        |       |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.                               | McGuinness, Conor D.      |       |
| Heneghan, Barry.                                  | Mitchell, Denise.         |       |
| Heydon, Martin.                                   | Murphy, Paul.             |       |
| Higgins, Emer.                                    | Mythen, Johnny.           |       |
| Keogh, Keira.                                     | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |       |
| Lahart, John.                                     | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |       |
| Lowry, Michael.                                   | Nolan, Carol.             |       |
| Maxwell, David.                                   | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |       |
| McAuliffe, Paul.                                  | O'Donoghue, Richard.      |       |

|                             |                           |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| McCarthy, Noel.             | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| McGrath, Mattie.            | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| Moynihán, Michael.          | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| Moynihán, Shane.            | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           | Smith, Duncan.            |  |
| O'Connor, James.            | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| O'Dea, Willie.              | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          | Ward, Mark.               |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    | Whitmore, Jennifer.       |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |                           |  |
| Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.          |                           |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |                           |  |
| Richmond, Neale.            |                           |  |
| Roche, Peter.               |                           |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.             |                           |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                           |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.               |                           |  |
| Timmins, Edward.            |                           |  |
| Toole, Gillian.             |                           |  |
| Troy, Robert.               |                           |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Alan Kelly.

Amendment declared carried.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask the Members for their attention. This debate will conclude in 30 minutes. We may, however, conclude prior to that, in which case we will have one deferred division on the Residential Tenancies Bill 2026 before we move to the substantive debate.

Seanad amendment No. 2:

Section 11: In page 10, after "of" to insert "fair".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 3:

Section 11: In page 10, line 7, to delete “that, in all the circumstances of the case” and substitute “that the publication was fair in all the circumstances of the case, in that”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seanad amendments Nos. 4 and 5 are related and may be discussed together by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Seanad amendment No. 4:

Section 13: In page 11, after line 42, to insert the following:

“(3) For the avoidance of doubt, the live broadcast defence shall not fail by reason only of the live programme concerned having been broadcast with a minimal delay.”.

**Deputy Jim O’Callaghan:** Amendments Nos. 4 and 5 amend section 13 of the Bill, which introduces a defence for broadcasters where a defamatory statement is made during a live broadcast, where the broadcaster can demonstrate that it took reasonable and prudent steps to prevent the publication of such a statement.

Amendment No. 4 addresses a concern raised in the Seanad as to whether the defence would apply in circumstances where there is a brief delay in transmission of the broadcast. It is not the intention that a short delay in transmission in itself would mean that a broadcaster could not rely on the defence. Amendment No. 4, therefore, provides that for the avoidance of doubt the defence shall not fail by reason only of the live programme concerned having been broadcast with a minimal delay.

Amendment No. 5 is a consequential amendment which renumbers the existing subsection (3) of the proposed live broadcast defence. I recommend these amendments to the House.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 5:

Section 13: In page 12, to delete line 1 and substitute the following:

“(4) In this section—”

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendments reported.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A message will be sent to Seanad Éireann acquainting it that Dáil Éireann has agreed to amendments Nos. 1 to 5, inclusive, made by Seanad Éireann to the Defamation (Amendment) Bill 2024.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Health has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 38 - Health.

**Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a deferred division relating to Second Stage of the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026, taken on Thursday, 5 February 2026. 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, 73; Níl, 68; Staon, 1. |                         |                 |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                     | Staon           |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.          | Toole, Gillian. |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.           |                 |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.         |                 |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard.  |                 |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.            |                 |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.           |                 |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.          |                 |
| Browne, James.                               | Carthy, Matt.           |                 |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Clarke, Sorca.          |                 |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Collins, Michael.       |                 |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Conway-Walsh, Rose.     |                 |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Coppinger, Ruth.        |                 |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Cronin, Réada.          |                 |
| Cahill, Michael.                             | Crowe, Seán.            |                 |
| Callaghan, Catherine.                        | Cullinane, David.       |                 |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.                  | Cummins, Jen.           |                 |
| Chambers, Jack.                              | Daly, Pa.               |                 |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.                        | Devine, Máire.          |                 |
| Clendennen, John.                            | Doherty, Pearse.        |                 |
| Collins, Niall.                              | Donnelly, Paul.         |                 |
| Connolly, John.                              | Ellis, Dessie.          |                 |
| Cooney, Joe.                                 | Farrelly, Aidan.        |                 |
| Cummins, John.                               | Gannon, Gary.           |                 |
| Currie, Emer.                                | Gibney, Sinéad.         |                 |
| Daly, Martin.                                | Gogarty, Paul Nicholas. |                 |
| Dempsey, Aisling.                            | Graves, Ann.            |                 |
| Dillon, Alan.                                | Guirke, Johnny.         |                 |
| Dolan, Albert.                               | Hayes, Eoin.            |                 |
| Fleming, Sean.                               | Healy-Rae, Danny.       |                 |
| Foley, Norma.                                | Healy, Seamus.          |                 |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.                     | Hearne, Rory.           |                 |
| Geoghegan, James.                            | Kelly, Alan.            |                 |
| Grealish, Noel.                              | Kenny, Eoghan.          |                 |
| Harkin, Marian.                              | Kerrane, Claire.        |                 |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.                          | Lawless, Paul.          |                 |
| Heneghan, Barry.                             | Lawlor, George.         |                 |

|                             |                           |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Heydon, Martin.             | McDonald, Mary Lou.       |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | McGettigan, Donna.        |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | McGuinness, Conor D.      |  |
| Lahart, John.               | Mitchell, Denise.         |  |
| Lowry, Michael.             | Murphy, Paul.             |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | Mythen, Johnny.           |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | Nash, Ged.                |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | Nolan, Carol.             |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | O'Donoghue, Richard.      |  |
| 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.         |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| O'Connor, James.            | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| O'Dea, Willie.              | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          | Smith, Duncan.            |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| Ó Feargháil, Seán.          | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| Richmond, Neale.            | Ward, Mark.               |  |
| Roche, Peter.               | Whitmore, Jennifer.       |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.             |                           |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                           |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.               |                           |  |
| Timmins, Edward.            |                           |  |
| Troy, Robert.               |                           |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Denise Mitchell and Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

Question declared carried.

## Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages

### SECTION 1

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendment No. 1 has been ruled out of order.

Amendment No. 1 not moved.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 2, 7 and 8 are related and may be discussed together.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I move amendment No. 2:

In page 5, between lines 29 and 30, to insert the following:

"(2) Within three months of the coming into operation of this act the Minister shall produce a report into the affordability of current rents and establish a board to reset rents to affordable levels, where the guideline for establishing affordability will be rents that are, in general, no more than 20 per cent of a tenant's income.

(3) Within three months of the coming into operation of this act the Minister shall produce a report into the establishing of a principle that the rights of a tenant shall not be affected by the size or type of the landlord and/or the date of the tenancy commencement.

(4) Within three months of the coming into operation of this act the Minister shall produce a report aimed at establishing the principle of preventing "no fault" evictions."

The best place to be to respond to the Government's Bill probably is with the protestors assembling outside Leinster House. The Bill will make an already dire housing crisis even worse by allowing landlords charging extortionate rents that are unaffordable for huge numbers of people to reset those rents to even higher levels. It beggars belief that the Government is doing this unless one remembers that it is not really representing the interests of the people affected by the crisis but, rather, is representing the interests of those profiteering on the backs of the housing misery of others. There can be no other explanation for what the Government is doing with this Bill.

My amendment No. 1 sought, in essence, to stop the Bill until the Government had looked at what its impact would be on the affordability of rents, had addressed the issue of no-fault evictions and had a plan to make rents affordable. In the absence of that amendment, which was ruled out of order, amendment No. 2 seeks to force the Government to do those things in the aftermath of passing the Bill. Of course, I do not believe the Government is in any way serious about addressing those issues, whether before, during or after the Bill is passed, because if it were, it would not have introduced the Bill in the first place.

However, for the sake of form, let us rehearse the Government's argument. It is like the argument made by the US military during the Vietnam War that it needed to bomb villages to save them. The Government is saying that to reduce rents, it must increase them. It is perverse Orwellian logic. Rents must be allowed to be reset to even more unaffordable levels because somehow, by magic, that will make them go down at some point in the future. There is no evidence, ever or anywhere, of that happening. This is market dogma of the absolutely worst kind. The reason the Government is not bothered that it makes no sense whatsoever is that, in fact, the Bill will do what the Government really wants it to do, which is to further enrich property speculators, investors and corporate landlords.

My view is that Members of the Dáil who are landlords should recuse themselves from this debate and should not vote on the Bill. It is absolutely unconscionable that we have a proposal that will jack up already unaffordable rents to even more unaffordable levels and that people in here who vote for it might benefit financially from it. That is outrageous. There is a disproportionate number of landlords among the Members from the Government parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and among some of the Independent Members backing up the Government. The number is disproportionate in the context of the political parties in the Dáil and in terms of broader representation in society.

Beyond the question of people financially benefiting, we have a Government that believes the nonsense that somehow property investors will solve the housing crisis. I kind of cannot believe it. The reason we have a housing crisis is because the entire housing sector was handed over by the State to property investors after the crisis of 2008 to 2009. Cherrywood, in my area, as the biggest residential development in the entire country and one of the biggest in Europe, offers a pretty good test case of housing policy. At the point when that development was taken over by the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, and thereby nationalised and brought into public ownership, it could have been developed by the State to deliver social and affordable housing. Instead, Governments led by Fine Gael and subsequently Fianna Fáil decided to hand it to property investors.

The consequence of this was that for quite a few years, those investors sat on the development because it was more profitable to do that than to build houses. We were actively seeking at the time for those houses to be built. We were not objecting; we were asking that they be built. However, the investors sat and waited for the value of those properties to go up and the housing crisis to get worse. Then they started to flip them to other property developers. Mel Reynolds said to me at the time that Hines probably made a profit on Cherrywood before a single brick was laid. It made profit from speculating on zoned land.

What prices are being charged for the houses and apartments Hines eventually started to build there? The houses are going for €600,000 and €700,000, which is unaffordable for the vast majority of people. The rents being charged are €2,000, €2,500, €3,000 and €3,500 a month, which are likewise unaffordable for the vast majority of people. These homes will end up being owned by big property investment funds, large international pension funds and so on, which will charge these extortionate rents. Now the Government wants a reset in order that even higher rents can be charged. By the way, the developer does not want to build the town centre that is needed by the community because it cannot make as much profit out of doing so. That is where this stuff leads. The Government thinks these people will reduce rents as a consequence of allowing them to reset those rents upwards. It is absolute nonsense. This Government measure will increase investor profits, make rents even more unaffordable and lead to increased speculation. It will do nothing to reduce rents. In fact, it will do worse than nothing in that it will exacerbate the housing crisis.

All of this extraordinary action is supposedly justified on the basis there will be some greater protection and security for tenants by way of the six-year rule. The problem with that is if rents are unaffordable and if people can still be evicted for not being able to pay the rent, which will be allowed to happen, then the likelihood of not being able to pay an unaffordable rent and therefore getting evicted is a lot higher. Some 60,000 to 70,000 tenancies end on a voluntary basis or just end.

That means almost all tenancies - 60,000 to 70,000 a year - will end over a period of about a decade. That means all rents very quickly will be unaffordable. In Dublin, the average rent is €2,100 and they will all go up to the level of what is advertised on *daft.ie*. If we go on *daft.ie* and look for something now, they are €2,500, €3,000 and €3,500. All rents will be up to that level. There will be dramatic increases and that will happen all over the country, exacerbating the housing crisis and driving more people into homelessness because there is literally nowhere for them to go that is affordable. That is what is going to happen.

I will mention a couple of other consequences of all of this. People who are on HAP will potentially get a double hit on all of this. Many of the people who are on HAP are paying top-up payments to the private landlord, and the HAP levels, inadequate as they are, are not adjusted for rent increases. Therefore, if your landlord increases the rent and you are on HAP, the top-up you have to pay is even more. Huge numbers of people are in serious trouble due to the top-ups they are having to pay because they are also paying a council-based rent and council rents are now going up as well. There is a change in Dublin city. They are moving now to increase rents in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. It is being done in different ways in different places, but across the country local authority rents are going up as well. Some of the most vulnerable people will get a double hit because of what the Government is doing, driving even more people into homelessness and crisis situations.

On the protection of tenancy thing, there is a loophole I guarantee will be exploited by the landlords now for those tenants where there is a little bit of nominally greater protection because of the six-year thing, though it is also possible now. That loophole comes into play if the house, the residence, is not suitable to the person's need. Do you know that means? It means a tenant can get evicted for their rental property being overcrowded. If a person with no kids then has a child, or a person has another child, the residence is now not suitable to their needs because they need a bigger place. A landlord can say, "Sorry, I am evicting you because there are more people in the house than there was when I signed the lease to put you in." That will be allowed for under the legislation. They will find ways to do that.

Do these corporate landlords do that kind of thing? Oh they absolutely do. I have the living proof in a multi-unit development called St. Helen's Court which is across the road from my constituency office in Dún Laoghaire. I do not know how many times I have raised it. Eight or nine years later, the majority of the units, all of them perfect units, are sitting there empty since it was taken over by a vulture fund and then another vulture fund which tried to mass-evict the tenants. It eventually drove them out. We successfully resisted some of the attempts to evict people but eventually, with the grind of being threatened constantly with eviction and having to go to the RTB, people just left. Some of the people did get housed by the council. The majority of those properties continue to sit there empty because it suits the vulture fund for them to be empty in order that it can get beyond the existing legislation's restrictions on rent increases, eventually jack up the rents again and get around the existing RPZs. That is what they do. The landlords play the long game. They inflict misery on the tenants. They try to evict people, eventually drive them out and sit on the properties, in this case for nearly a decade. It is perfectly empty when there are people homeless on the street outside. They do this because it is profitable to do it and the Government allows that. It is absolutely shocking and now the Government is going to facilitate even further that sort of profiteering.

There is a lot more to be said and I am sure my colleagues here will be saying many of those things but this is a disgrace. The best place for people who are worried about the housing crisis to be is out protesting. I hope we see more protests against this because the Government has really revealed its true colours on this one and we need to fight back. People who want something done about this housing crisis and who want to get affordable rents, secure and affordable housing and to protect tenants' rights need to begin to get organised on the streets.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I will speak in support of this group of amendments, amendments Nos. 2, 7 and 8. I will explain the detailed reasons for that in a moment.

I will start, however, with two small pieces of housekeeping. First, I acknowledge the very helpful role of the departmental officials. They have obviously been working on this Bill in a relatively short period of time and at any stage when either we or our committee sought additional information they have been very obliging in making sure we were facilitated in trying to understand the legislation. I wish to make clear that the criticisms I am going to make of this legislation are political criticisms directed at the Minister and the Government and not at the hard-working officials who are often put in very difficult positions producing complex legislation in short periods of time.

This is a truly appalling way to make legislation. One can always tell when a government is embarrassed by its own proposals. One can always tell when a government is anxious that the public who are affected by its legislation get as little opportunity as possible to hear about those changes until it is too late by government rushing through legislation in impossibly short periods of time. The Bill before us is not simple. It is not straightforward, as we will discuss throughout the evening, and it is going to profoundly impact the lives of tens of thousands of people. Yet, we are being given an entirely inadequate Committee Stage opportunity. In effect, there will be no Report and Final Stages. The Government is going to make the most substantial change to the regulation of the private rental sector in over a decade in the space of ten hours when includes the time spent on the Bill last week and this week and whatever time it will get in the Seanad next week. Of course, the problem with that is not only is there a lack of scrutiny and a lack of media and public attention, it also means that whatever the Government's intentions, the negative consequences of the legislation are probably going to be even worse. Again, there are some specific instances in which I will raise that. I put on record my strong objection to how the Minister has proceeded with this. If this becomes the way in which he does his business, it will make the job of those of us on the Oireachtas housing committee who take our jobs as legislators seriously much more difficult.

Specifically, with respect to the amendments requiring the Minister to bring forward a number of reports, there is a continuity between the three amendments because they all call for reports related to affordability of rents now but also affordability as a consequence of the changes the Government is making. I have tabled a number of amendments that are similar to amendment No. 1 in particular, to which Deputy Boyd Barrett referred earlier, to try to delay the passage of the Bill until such reports were produced. They have been ruled out of order and I fully accept the decision of the Ceann Comhairle but they are similar in intention to these amendments.

For me, one of the really shocking things when we dealt with the legislation at pre-legislative scrutiny is that when we inquired as to whether there had been any attempt by the

Department to make an assessment of the impact of the provisions of this Bill on the rents that renters pay, the answer was "No". That is an astounding omission on behalf of Government and here is the reason for that. At the very centre of this Bill, the most significant and controversial aspect is the market reset provision that will, from 1 March this year, allow a landlord to reset the market rent when a new tenant moves in. If the previous tenant left voluntarily or as a result of breach of contract, that market reset will start at the beginning of that tenancy and for all categories of tenant it will be repeated every six years. One would have thought, given the significance of that change, the Department might want to know the answer to two questions. First, how many people is that likely to impact in the first month, six months, 12 months, etc. The second question one would have thought a Minister who is interested in the impact of his legislation on renters would ask is how much extra they are going to pay. They are pretty reasonable questions which these amendments are putting to the Minister, albeit in retrospect because that is all we can do. Thankfully, even though the Minister did not think this was important information to have before bringing such radical proposals to Cabinet, the Residential Tenancies Board publishes the data that anybody with a little bit of time and a spreadsheet can understand.

I would like to put on the record of the House the answers to those questions which these amendments are seeking the Minister to provide, which the Minister should have assessed and provided for himself, his Government colleagues and our committee prior to the passage of the legislation, but it is important that we hear it today. Question one is how many tenants, people or households is the market reset likely to impact month on month from March? Thankfully, the Residential Tenancies Board, over the last two and a half years, produced quarterly data looking at renewed tenancies and new tenancies. We start to get a picture of quarter on quarter, how many new first-time tenancies are created. The dataset is over two and a half years, so it gives us a good picture of what the trends are. The straight answer is, on average, every quarter, 25% or more of registered tenancies are new first-time tenancies. That equates in the last four quarters to over 60,000 new tenancies. Some are single people, some are couples and some are families with children. That means, if those trends continue, the potential number of new first-time tenants impacted by the market reset is somewhere in the region of 60,000 if trends continue. That proposition is supported by the Residential Tenancies Board's other important piece of information that the average length of a tenancy is about three and a half years.

The first thing to say is that we are looking at, from March through to the end of this year and into next year, tens of thousands of renters whom the Minister and his Minister of State, and my colleague, Deputy McGrath from the housing committee, are going to expose to the market reset. That is an indisputable fact. Sure, the changes may result in some changes in patterns and levels of churn, but it is likely they will be minimal. That means huge numbers of people will be impacted by this month on month from March.

It leads us to the next question directly related to the three amendments before us. What is that likely to cost? How much extra rent are Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry and Healy-Rae Independents allowing landlords to charge from that market reset? I appreciate this is going to be uncomfortable listening for some folks on the other side of the Chamber but it is important that we have it on the record. In order to determine or try to work out what the likely cost is, we also have really helpful data from the Residential Tenancies Board every single quarter. Over the last two and a half years, it tells us, Statewide, regionally and in every county, including the Ceann Comhairle's, the Minister's and mine, what rents are being charged on

average for existing renters and what the new rents are. That means, on a spreadsheet, you can set out rents for existing renters, rents for new renters, look at the difference and that will give you a pretty reasonable estimation of the potential increased rent from the market reset. In fact, that data is from quarter 2 of 2025, which means the scale of the uplift is likely to be much greater.

What is the answer to the question? Based on the RTB's overall data, anybody hit with the market reset from March is likely to be paying at a minimum 17% more rent than they would have otherwise. That is a significant amount of money. That averages to about €3,000 of additional rent in a year. What the Minister is asking us to vote for is for those people who start new tenancies from March of this year to be paying at a minimum €3,000 more a year. When you start to look at the county breakdowns, this is where it starts to get really interesting. The county-by-county and city breakdowns are utterly staggering. Limerick City, the Minister of State's constituency, will have one of the potentially highest market reset rates in the State at roughly €4,000. What the Minister of State is going to vote for tonight is that renters in his constituency, if they start a new tenancy from the beginning of March, could, over the next 12 months, on the basis of the RTB figures, face €4,000 a year more than under the current regime.

I appreciate that might come as a surprise or shock to the Minister of State, but is it not utterly bizarre that an Opposition Member using RTB figures has to stand on this side of the Chamber five or six months after this was proposed and it may be the first time he is being told the actual impact on the people he claims to represent? Waterford City is in a similar region as well. Let us look at Wexford, a Cheann Comhairle, because it is important we all know the impact of this. I know she is neutral and not involved in this, but the uplift is 21% higher rent than they would otherwise be paying as a consequence of this Bill. That is an extra €2,532 a year. I am sure when she is out in her constituency she will be told it is huge sum of money for a young couple trying to rent to save for a home or for a modest income working person to pay. What about Wicklow? Wicklow will be €4,000. Leitrim will be €3,000. The single biggest uplift, the city that is going to expose renters to the greatest level of additional rent over 12 months, is Galway city at €5,000.

Before we have a conversation, and we will have that conversation today, about supply or tenure - because in both of those, the Minister's arguments are very questionable - the facts, as evidenced by the Residential Tenancies Board in its registration and rent data, are that if this Bill goes through tonight, into the Seanad tomorrow and is passed next week, new renters in new tenancies will be facing potential rent increases in the order of 20%, 25% or 30% more - €2,000, €3,000, €4,000 or, in the case of Galway, €5,000. The Minister has to ask himself what he has against renters. Does he really think renters have that kind of money to pay that extra? We know with data from the ESRI that renters, typically speaking - not exclusively, but typically speaking - have lower incomes. These are the people least able to pay the additional charges. We also know that students, the overwhelming majority of whom do not live in the student-specific accommodation sector but rather live in the private rental sector, typically speaking on nine-month leases not 12 months, come September, are going to get hit substantially again and again. That means, for example, families from the western seaboard, from Donegal, the north west, etc., who do not have significant university places close to them, are going to be hit by phenomenally greater rent increases. We will talk about the mess the Government is making of the student-specific sector later.

The summary is as follows. I have been saying this all week, and it is really interesting because nobody in the Government has responded to this. The summary consequence of this proposal, which these amendments are trying to get to the bottom of, is that somewhere in the region of 60,000 households - singles, couples, families - over the next 12 months, will be asked by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry and Healy-Rae Independents to pay rent increases in the order of €3,000, €4,000 or €5,000. When you strip it all away, that is what is in front of us. That is why I think these amendments are enormously important. They are asking the Minister to do something he should have done and should have published previously.

You might ask why are you so intent on imposing so much hardship on these renters. The Minister has given us the answer. I am sure he will repeat it again today. He will say the only way we can tackle the housing crisis is if we increase supply. The primary approach to increasing supply from this Government is to incentivise large institutional investors from the global markets to come to Ireland and build high-density apartment schemes because, as supply goes up, then, over time, rents will moderate. What utter rubbish. The reason we know it is rubbish is because there is no analysis anywhere, either produced by the Department or anyone else, that tells us that if you increase institutional investment to the high end of the market, high density and high price, it will have any impact on price other than perpetually increasing rent. It is economic absurdity, yet the Minister repeats it as if it is some kind of empirical fact. If he really believes it, he should publish the evidence. Get a bunch of housing and economic experts to produce a report and put it on the table.

*6 o'clock*

In fact, the way the Government is designing this means that not only will new tenants in existing rental stock be hit with a market reset, in most cases, at the start and near the end, but for new apartment stock, that will not even be constrained by the rent pressure zones in between. It will be the CPI. It will be the most aggressive form of inflation possible.

If I were an institutional investor - thankfully, I am not - the Government is guaranteeing me perpetually increasing rents irrespective of what happens for new and sitting tenants, which is something it is also permitting for new student-specific accommodation. Locked into its formula here is an incentive for those investors to continue to increase rents. As we know, because there continues to be an exit of small, semi-professional accidental landlords from the market, for a range of reasons, some of which is dissatisfaction with Government policy, the lower end and lower priced private rental stock will continue to deplete. The only new stock, if we get any significant increase at all, will be high end, high density and high cost. Investors will not be building anything in the Minister's constituency or anything in Limerick. They might build something in the docklands of Cork, in the constituency of the Minister of State, Deputy McGrath, but I do not think the hard-working constituents he well-represents at our committee when we talk about affordable homes think that €3,000 a month is affordable for a standard 70 sq. m one-bedroom in the centre of Cork. I do not think anybody elected him or me to advocate for that, but that is what he is voting for here tonight. This will not increase supply in the places it is needed. Where it does increase supply, it will be exceptionally expensive. Meanwhile, the lower cost rental, along with the under-provision of social and affordable and private for-purchase homes, will dissipate.

I will make a final point on these amendments. Every time I am in a debate on these matters with somebody from the Government, the last thing they want to talk about are rents because

God forbid we talk about the centrepiece of the legislation. Instead, what the Government keeps talking about is that it is giving people real security of tenure and new shiny six-year tenancies where they cannot be evicted. First, under Part 4 of the Residential Tenancies Act, we already have six-year tenancies. They used to be for four years and are now for six; they already exist. Second, existing tenants who remain in their current properties, and Deputy Hearn made this point on Second Stage, get no benefit. New tenants of small landlords can still be evicted during that six-year period. There is a bit of a restriction, but there are still three significant grounds upon which notice of termination can be provided. For large landlords, the Government is finally putting on the Statute Book what already exists in practice, which is institutional investors only evicting for breach of contract.

The problem is, and this relates directly back to these amendments, what value is security of tenure if people cannot afford the rent? It is almost as if the Minister has forgotten why rent pressure zones were introduced in the first place. I was never a supporter of rent pressure zones. I sat up there and argued tooth and nail that Simon Coveney was getting it wrong and tabled amendments that the Government would not accept. Much of our criticisms of the rent pressure zones - many of us voted against them in the end - came to pass. They provided modest protection for some but you could not have made a bigger hames of rent regulation than Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil at the time. The reason rent pressure zones were introduced was that from 2014 to 2016 a new phenomenon had entered our housing system: child and family homelessness. That is something that in 2011 was virtually unheard of but because of double-digit rising rents the number of families and children entering emergency accommodation rose for one reason and one reason only; an inability to pay a legally sanctioned rent increase from the Government, which forced them into homelessness. It was double-digit rental inflation. Rent pressure zones put some level of pause on that, but what the Government is proposing here is to go back to double-digit rental inflation.

Deputy Boyd Barrett made a point that has to be emphasised over and over again. Last year, about 20,000 eviction notices or notices of termination were issued. Many of the people who got those notices were waiting incredibly long periods for social housing. Their rent was subsidised by the housing assistance payment, HAP. Today, the gap between HAP and new rents is already too great for the vast majority of those people. If another €3,000, €4,000 or €5,000 is added on to those new rents, it is game over. Why would the Minister, a year into his job, when child and family homelessness is rising, introduce a policy that every single policy expert, front-line homeless service provider and anybody who can count is telling him will increase and accelerate the rate at which families with children will be in homelessness? We will all stand here, month after month, and remind the Government that it took this decision. It took a decision to allow market rents to increase to double digits. As a consequence of that, people who desperately need private rental cannot get it and are pushed into homelessness.

The Minister will accuse me of personalising it when I do this at some later stage, but that means he is directly responsible, by the actions and legislation he is promoting, securing Cabinet approval for and getting the approval of backbenchers, for all of that. It will push up rents and will not increase supply to any significant level. Where it does result in increased supply, it will be expensive and inappropriate and will lead to increased levels of homelessness. The Government is introducing a security of tenure regime that is so complex it will be very difficult to explain, even harder to understand and virtually impossible to enforce. I have been here for a decade and I have seen some pretty politically shabby pieces of rent reform in terms

of what the Government asked officials to do. This is by far the worst in a decade. This is what the Minister will be remembered for. The legacy he is going to leave is higher and ever-increasing rents, far greater financial pressure on renters, rising levels of homelessness and a security of tenure regime, which I will put money on today we will be back here about in two, three or four years' time. Whoever replaces the Minister for the mess he will have left will be trying to undo and unpick this, just as we stood here with Simon Coveney in 2016 and pleaded with him to do it properly, do it right, listen to the experts and to those people who know better. He ignored us, Eoghan Murphy ignored us, Darragh O'Brien ignored us and now the Minister is ignoring us. The consequence will be more housing failure.

There are eminently sensible amendments. I am happy to support them. I am very interested in hearing the Minister's response to what I have said and I will continue the debate. Without doubt, this will be remembered as one of the worst interventions in the private rental market in recent history and it will be the name of the Minister, Deputy James Browne, that will be associated with it.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** This Bill is a mirage because of what the Minister is talking about regarding security of tenure. There are things in the Bill about security of tenure that I would welcome were they in isolation, but we have a situation where the Government has a policy outcome whereby it has drafted a Bill that is so complicated and convoluted. It has made a policy decision that is essentially pulling in two separate directions. It claims it is trying to offer renters improved security of tenure but it is allowing landlords to reset the rent in between tenancies, which all but wipes that out.

I will speak to amendments Nos. 7 and 8 in my name. I will also speak in support of amendment No. 2. My colleagues and I have all asked the Minister what modelling or analysis the Government has done in relation to this Bill. He comes back constantly and talks about the Housing Agency review into rent pressure zones. That review does not provide a predictable analysis as to what the effects of this Bill will be, which have been set out very well by the Deputies who spoke. I look at my city of Limerick, which the Minister of State and I both represent. We have had the highest level of rent increases in the entire country. I look at the supply issues we have and at what the Minister says about this Bill apparently incentivising supply, but the supply this Bill will incentivise, if it incentivises any, will be expensive, high-end, build-to-rent apartments.

Such apartments do not get built in Limerick. With the market reset mechanism, the average length of a tenancy being three to three and half years, and the deficit we have in student specific accommodation in Limerick, I am concerned in respect of the city I represent that renters in Limerick will be on the hook for rent increases of at least 20%.

I look back to the residential tenancies amendment Act the then Minister, Simon Coveney, introduced in 2016, which introduced the RPZ regime and the 4%. Flawed and all as that mechanism is and was, at the very least, when then Deputy Coveney introduced that legislation, modelling was done. Modelling was done that was targeted at areas with the highest and fastest rising rents. With this Bill, the Minister has not done anything to look at rent predictability. Not one witness who came before the Oireachtas joint committee on housing said this Bill would result in rents not rising any more or rents falling, and rents need to fall. They cannot rise any more. Renters cannot pay any more and every witness who came in told us clearly

that this Bill will open tenants - tens of thousands of them - to absolutely extortionate rent increases.

As my colleague Deputy Boyd Barrett pointed out earlier, there is a huge issue with HAP. The HAP limits, plus the homeless HAP and the discretionary HAP top-ups, do not go anywhere near what rents actually cost at the moment. With this Bill there will be a real return to economic evictions. People will be evicted because they cannot pay the rent. The truth behind this legislation is that it is for large institutional investors and big property developers. It is not for smaller SME builders. It is certainly not for renters. The Government constantly talks about balance. I find that term offensive in relation to this Bill because the balance is being struck against renters who cannot afford to pay what they are paying. As true as night follows day, the original Residential Tenancies Act that was introduced in 2004 has been amended 14 times. That means every 18 months on average the Residential Tenancies Act gets amended. I guarantee that the Minister or another Minister will be back because rents will rise to a level that the Minister and the Government will not be able to sustain.

I have tabled amendment No. 7, the purpose of which is to require the Minister and the Government to conduct a review of the operation and effectiveness of all amendments made by this Bill to the Residential Tenancies Act to include findings and conclusions and that the review be laid before the Oireachtas. The Minister constantly talks about the need to incentivise supply, but we have not had any clarity about what this Bill will do, bar our analysis of what it will do to rent levels. There is no certainty that it will deliver anything like the level of supply needed to arrest the upward trend in rents. Rents have gone up by the bones of 100% in Dublin, for example, in over a decade and they will go up and up again. I simply do not believe this Bill will work. The Minister has not laid the evidence before us to show how this Bill will work. There needs to be a statutory duty on the Minister to examine what he has done, what the effects are and to come back to the House.

Amendment No. 8 is similar. It is to insert a new section 3, with the heading "Impact forecast". It requires the Minister, within not more than six months after the Bill is passed, to publish a statement of the forecast of the impact of the Bill on market rents for the following years. The reason the Government has not done any modelling like this is that it knows that fundamentally what we are saying about rent levels, what we have calculated from looking at the RTB data, is what will transpire, if it is not worse, certainly in the short term. In this amendment, I am looking for the forecast to relate to a representative sample of tenancies. The general public, and most important the tens of thousands of renters who are terrified of the effects of this Bill, are entitled to know what the impact of these proposals will be, how much extra rent they will be forced to pay. It is beyond irresponsible to push a Bill like this through in less than 12 hours if the Minister cannot make such a forecast and if he does not and cannot model what the Bill will do, how it will affect rent levels in the coming decade, how much renters will pay and what the outcome of the Bill will be in terms of this so-called supply.

We have asked questions like this nearly half a dozen times since the general scheme was published and I constantly get the same answer. What will we see with this Bill? For example, there will be new categories of landlord. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael backbenchers will come here tonight and they will not have the foggiest notion of what they are voting on because this Bill is so confusing and convoluted. For example, the restrictions for larger landlords should be applied universally because the tenants of larger landlords are usually tenants in build to

rent properties, properties owned by institutional investors. Their rent is already unbelievably expensive and these properties are rarely, if ever, sold. For the tenants of the new so-called smaller landlords, not much effectively changes and the fact is that people should not be condemned to rent increases of 20% and possibly 30%. We will have a situation of the average length of a tenancy being between three and three and a half years, when it is ordinary working people, people on low incomes, who will have to, in some cases, pay 40%, 50% or 60% of their hard earned income on rent. This will absolutely crush them and the Minister has not set out at all empirically what this Bill will do to rents in the private rental sector. As I said earlier, more of this was done when Simon Coveney introduced the Bill at the end of 2016 which introduced RPZs.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** As I have stated previously, this Bill will be deeply damaging for renters. When we talk about renters, who are we talking about? We are talking about families, individuals and young people who are trying to work, go to school, go to college and live their lives. This Bill increases rents in a way that will absolutely hammer people. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Minister are completely disconnected from the reality of what is involved in trying to rent a home right now. If they had any sense of what it is like to rent or to try to find somewhere to rent, they would not be doing this. Earlier, the Taoiseach stated that this is what we have to do in order to get supply. The Minister also stated that this is what is needed to get supply and that at some point supply will increase and rents will come down.

I have asked the Minister and the Taoiseach the following question on a number of occasions. Neither has answered it. At what point will this policy incentivise a level of supply that will bring rents down? Will it be in five, ten or 15 years' time? It is never. Rents are never going to come down unless they crash, and then we will have an economic crash. That is the only point at which rents are going to come back down to any sort of sustainable level. In the context of this policy, the Minister is saying clearly that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents are willing to sacrifice these renters, who will have to pay higher rents in the coming months and years to incentivise a supply of housing that at some point will lead to rents coming down.

My colleague Deputy Eoin Ó Broin referred earlier to officials. I asked the officials who appeared before the housing committee the point at which this policy will bring down rents. They said they hope that it will bring down rents. This Bill is based on a flawed market theory of housing that completely fails to understand how housing markets and systems work. They do not work like normal market commodities, with supply and demand and prices going up and down. I was asked about this earlier. Some might ask whether it is the case that if the market price is not what a renter is willing to pay and if a landlord can get that market price, is that not reasonable? However, housing is not a banana or a car. It is a fundamental human need. When people are faced with either having or not having a home, they will pay absolutely everything they can to get one.

If the rent is determined by the market, landlords will squeeze as much as they can get out of it and people are forced to pay more and more. It is not like buying a car or a banana; they do not have a choice. They need a home, and so they spend everything they have to get it. That is why housing markets are regulated and why there are rent controls. It is the reason the Government brought in rent controls in the first instance, but now it is undoing that and has been captured and has once more bought into thinking that housing markets work like the

normal supply-and-demand models highlighted in junior certificate economics. This is not junior certificate economics. This is people's lives. It is the lives of hundreds of thousands of current and future renters. The Taoiseach has told the Opposition that it has no monopoly on compassion, that those in government are also compassionate and that Fianna Fáil was and is the party of a social conscience.

There is no social conscience in this decision. It is a cruel, crude, cold decision that the Minister knows and has agreed will lead to higher rents. Who is going to pay those rents? Has he thought about that? It is going to be families who are struggling to try to cover rents now. They are going to be evicted. This is the other flaw with the Bill. The Minister and the Taoiseach have both stated, very misleadingly, that this Bill is about increased security of tenure for renters. That is absolutely untrue. This is not about increased security of tenure for renters. All existing renters will get no new security of tenure. Again, the Taoiseach stated earlier that this will have no impact on existing renters. That is the point. It provides no additional protections from no-fault evictions for existing renters, so we are going to continue to see a tsunami of evictions.

I am not sure how the Minister feels about the fact that we have reached the highest level of evictions in this country since Famine times. That is what we are seeing. I do not know how the Minister stands over that or how he stands over a Bill that will make the situation worse. Not only are we going to continue to have the pressure of evictions like those that are happening for various reasons, mainly because landlords are selling up, now, we are also going to have a situation where some landlords will be licking their lips at the thought that they can get market rents if they get particular tenants out of their properties and that they will no longer be subject to the inter-tenancy rent cap.

The really disappointing part of this Bill is that it came about on foot of a decision that was made directly as a result of lobbying by institutional investors. The lobbying record, as I have stated previously, makes this very clear. Irish Institutional Property represents all the big institutional funds, including IRES REIT, Kennedy Wilson and Ardstone. I have a copy of the lobbying register here. It shows the number of times Pat Farrell from Irish Institutional Property has met with the Government in respect of these policies - there is a list of meeting after meeting - and to push for these changes. Killian Woods wrote an article about IRES REIT in the *Business Post* last August. It talks about how IRES REIT, which is one of Ireland's biggest private landlords, with more than 3,500 properties, is so happy. It states:

From Ires Reit's perspective, the most eye-catching change was the new measure that now allows landlords to reset rents to market rates between tenancies. Under the current measures, landlords are required to maintain rents at the same level between tenancies.

The article describes how a representative of IRES REIT showed investors a chart which indicated that its average current rents are estimated to be 19% below market rent. The article then states:

Under the new rent control rules, there is a windfall sitting there for the company. It has the opportunity to unlock an additional €19.9 million of rent a year by raising rents to market rate.

IRES REIT is going to get €20 million a year from the measures contained in the Bill. Kennedy Wilson will be similar. The Government is going to give these investors €20 million a year as each churn happens, and renters will be required to pay the market rent.

This Bill has nothing to do with security of tenure, renters or balancing the rights of renters and landlords. It is about giving a windfall to institutional investors in this country, namely large corporate landlords. That is what it is about. The Government has bought in - hook, line and sinker - to their idea that if we allow rents to rise higher, supply will increase, the unit numbers will rise and that will deal with the housing crisis. The complete opposite is the case. This Bill will make the housing crisis substantially worse. It is a disastrous measure for renters and young people who are stuck at home.

It will put it more out of reach. It will put home ownership more out of reach. It is incredible really when we think how far Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have come from being the parties supposedly of home ownership to now being the parties of the big institutional investors. They are willingly making policy and laws to screw renters and the younger generation so that the institutional investors can make more profit. The Government is happy to stand over that.

I mentioned earlier the disconnect from the human misery this Bill is going to bring about. What has really disturbed me about all the discussion about this has been that disconnection. It terrifies me because what it says to me is that the Government is not actually concerned about this mass of human misery and the social catastrophe that is happening because it is willing to inflict more. It tells me that what it wants to do and what it is doing is putting in place policies that do not solve the housing crisis or make housing more affordable but simply keep the market going. This is, ultimately, another subsidisation of the private market to add to the very significant subsidies the Government gives out. I put the figures together there, and between the VAT cuts introduced in the budget, the HAP that goes to private landlords and Croí Cónaithe subsidies, we are talking about over €1 billion a year going to the private market every year. The figure over the lifetime of the Government will be €5 billion. This is €5 billion it will give to the private market with no permanent housing in return and no public housing delivered. We are talking about €5 billion. The Government says it will not create a State construction company because it will take too long and the Government is not sure. A fraction of that amount would set up a public construction company to build genuinely affordable homes.

The Government is not interested in solving the housing crisis. It just wants to keep the market going. It wants to keep the investors, the property developers, the banks and the system going as is because if it were interested in solving the housing crisis, it would realise that what it is doing with this is actually embedding an unsustainable market. That is what the Government is doing because these rents are completely unsustainable. I looked at the rents being charged on *daft.ie* and I look around the country. People are expected to pay thousands of euro every month. For example, in Cork, people have been charged €4,800 for a four-bedroom property. In Santry in my own constituency, the rent for a two-bed is €2,500 per month, the rent for a two-bed in Beaumont is €2,700 and the rent for a three-bedroom home in Galway is €3,000. This is a picture of the new units being built in Northwood in Santry. What are they charging? They are charging €1,900 for a studio, €2,600 for a two-bed apartment and €3,300 for a three-bed. This is before the Government's changes come in. When we look at the income of a teacher on €44,000, after taxes, we are talking about in the region of 117% of his or her entire take-home pay to pay rent of €3,300. If we take a nurse on €37,000, we are

talking about 127% of his or her entire take-home pay. The percentage for a person on the minimum wage with take-home pay of €1,900 a month is 168% of their take-home pay. It is impossible to pay these rents. This is how the Government expects an economy and society to function. Where are we going to get our nurses, teachers, bus drivers or doctors from? That is in our cities. They cannot function in many ways at the moment because of these policies.

It is deeply frustrating for many people around the country who are going to see their rents increased to market rent. It will not build one home for them. While it might incentivise a certain amount of really expensive apartments being built in Dublin, it will not build one new home in Carrick-on-Suir, Kerry, Louth, Donegal or Mayo. All the renters in those counties will face higher market rents, because all landlords will be able to bring the rent up to market rent when a tenant moves out or every six years in the new tenancies in those parts of the country, and they will not see one new unit from these measures. Not one new unit will be built by an institutional investor, which the Government is making these decisions for.

It is a disastrous policy and it just shows how disconnected Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are from the reality of this housing crisis. Unfortunately, it is not going to work and the housing crisis will continue. What will the Government bring about? It will bring about higher rents for renters. It is deeply disappointing and frustrating and we will continue to talk about this in terms of the disaster that the Government is going to make worse.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** This Bill should be called the raise the rent Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to raise people's rents. That is literally it. The Government likes to pretend that there is some greater, deeper meaning going on. It likes to talk about security of tenure but the purpose of this Bill is to raise people's rents. People's rents have already almost doubled in the past ten years but the Government thinks that for the people it represents - the big landlords, the so-called institutional investors - the rents are not rising fast enough so it is going to introduce this Bill to raise the rents even faster to cost the average renter more than €3,000 extra a year. That is the purpose of this Bill and it will be the consequence of this Bill. The Government is going to ram this Bill through. It will guillotine it and shut down the debate in this House tonight and the consequences are that people's rents are going to rise.

What does that look like? It is a massive further transfer of wealth from some of the poorest people in the country to some of the richest people and richest corporations in the country, which are already making plenty of money from their very many rental properties. That is one impact. Another impact is that evictions are going to soar and not from a low point but from a high point. Evictions are already at the same level proportionately as they were in the 1850s in Ireland. Do we know what came after that number of evictions in Ireland in the 1850s? What came after that was the Land War because people simply had enough and I think that is going to come now for the Government as well.

People may say that this does not make any sense. The Government has not presented any evidence to show what is going to happen and how this is magically going to translate into supply. All the experts are saying this is not working. The Government talks day in, day out about listening to hard-working people and trying to look out for renters, so why on earth is it bringing in a Bill that is going to rapidly increase people's rents? The answer is very simple. If it walks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck. It is a landlords' Government. That is the bottom-line truth of it. We have a Government that is

interested in representing the views and the material interests of big landlords. About one third of Government Deputies are landlords but the rest of them represent them very effectively in any case because ideologically they are committed to this idea that the market has to solve things and trickle-down economics. The Government for the past ten years has been implementing all the policies that are supposedly great and will resolve the housing crisis but that have resulted in the housing crisis getting worse, but by a happy coincidence, there is a big transfer of wealth from the public, through the State and taxpayers' money, to landlords and from renters to landlords. That is the essence of it. We have a landlords' Government that represents the interests of the tiny minority that are landlords and the even smaller minority that are big landlords in this country as opposed to all of those who are affected by the housing crisis.

The fundamental point is that the Government does not represent those who suffer from the housing crisis but those who profit from the housing crisis. Why does the Government keep introducing policies that make the housing crisis worse? It is time to draw the conclusion that it does not care about ending the housing crisis. If the housing crisis ended, the Government's friends - the developers and the big landlords - would not be able to make the sort of money they are currently able to make.

That is the fundamental point and it is why we need to get rid of this Government as soon as we can and build a movement on the streets and in communities to resist these rent increases and the evictions that are going to flow from it and to massively apply pressure on the Government on these issues.

I want to raise a point about landlords in this Dáil. It is shocking that about 20% of TDs in the Dáil are going to vote tonight on legislation that is personally going to benefit them. If you are a landlord and you vote in the Dáil tonight to pass this legislation, you are going to personally benefit, on average, to the tune of about €3,000. It is shocking that it is allowed in the first place, and, whether they agree with it or not, that the TDs affected would not put their hands up and say that they are personally affected by this and recuse themselves from the vote. Even at this late stage, I appeal to landlord TDs not to participate in this vote tonight. It is utterly wrong that landlords, who will personally benefit from the increasing of rents, are going to get to vote on this legislation. They will personally benefit from it while it will have such a devastating effect on so many people.

In general, we have a landlords' Government with plenty of landlord TDs, but it is a bit much that literally the landlords' lobbying organisation wrote amendments for TDs and the TDs literally copy and pasted them and submitted them. This is the democratic process. Independent Ireland's Gillian O'Toole literally got the same email that the rest of us got from the Irish Property Owners Association, IPOA, the landlords' lobby organisation, that asked us to put in these amendments on behalf of landlords. Independent Ireland said: "Yes, sir. We represent the landlords. We will submit the amendments." It is very blatant. Do not let anyone fall for the idea that Independent Ireland represents the common man or woman; it does no such thing. It explicitly represents the landlords. The landlord lobby group says that it wants these amendments and Independent Ireland says, "Yes, sure. We will put them in immediately." People should be aware of that.

I want to raise a particular point about the impact of this in terms of HAP. The point has been made about the HAP levels. The other point in relation to that is many HAP tenants across

the country will effectively have a double rent increase. Councils across the country are hiking council rents. Dublin City Council, for example, has voted to do so and is due to implement the hike from April. Galway City Council has done it and other councils across the country have done it too. It looks like South Dublin County is trying to go for significant increases. It is to be voted on towards the end of this year to come into effect next year. This is a nationwide process. It is being driven by council management, but it is also being driven by the Government. Reading the Government's latest housing plan, it explicitly talks about merging council rents and cost rental over time, in other words, doing away with the differential rent system and the basic and fair idea that the amount people pay for housing should be based on their income. It is bad enough that it is going to result in massive increases for council tenants, but HAP tenants are going to be doubly hit. HAP tenants are going to be faced with significant increases - let us say, 30% increases in what they are paying to the council - and then they are going to be hit by this increase which, if the HAP limits do not increase, all of which will be gobbled up in the top-ups that they are paying. They are the worst affected and they are some of the most vulnerable people in the housing market as a whole.

The Opposition is mostly united in this House - the left Opposition, certainly - in opposing what the Government is doing here, but I call on all the left parties to take a stand on the councils against these council rent increases. Even if they have voted in some cases to allow these to go ahead, they should reconsider it, particularly in light of what is happening here and the extra pressure that it is going to apply in terms of HAP tenants.

What our amendment seeks to do is show an image of how you could do things fundamentally differently. If you start from the point of view of not representing landlords but, instead, of representing the majority of people who are affected by the housing crisis, you would go about this in a very different way by establishing a board to reset rents to affordable levels and where the guideline for establishing affordability would be rents that are, in general, no more than 20% of a tenant's income.

That is the alternative way to tackle the housing crisis. It says let us stop pouring public money into the pockets of private landlords and developers. Let us stop pouring and enabling more and more private renters' money to be funnelled into the hands of landlords. Instead, let us protect tenants. Let us ban economic evictions. Let us control rents and use public money to have a State construction company to build social and affordable homes. That is the sensible thing to do, if you were not governed by the class interest of representing landlords and the free market ideology that goes alongside that.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** As I listened to some of the other speakers, I thought about some of the comments the Minister made at the housing committee and in this Chamber. I just do not get it. The Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, are intelligent people. We have seen the housing crisis go from a crisis to an emergency. We know that homelessness is off the charts and homelessness is only recorded as people living in emergency accommodation. It does not include the people who are living with three or four generations in the same home. It does not include the hidden homeless, the true figure that is there.

When the Minister and Minister of State look at the homelessness figures and the housing crisis and see house prices, rents and evictions going up, do they really, in their heart of hearts,

believe that this Bill is going to solve that? I do not believe they could, if they are the intelligent men I believe them to be.

The Minister and Minister of State inherited an unbelievable housing emergency and they are desperate to find solutions. The big investment companies, the big speculators and the vulture funds came in and produced a document for the Government that they claimed would deliver housing. It will not.

The only way to solve the crisis is through supply. It is by building social and affordable housing. Think of all the people who are living in HAP and RAS properties in the private rental market. If the Government delivers social and affordable housing and takes those people out of the private market, that frees up all the rental accommodation then for the renters who badly need it.

I talked to a couple of people over the weekend. They said to me that this is so cruel. They might not feel the consequences on 1 March, but they will in the future. They are terrified because their rents are too high already. Their rents are through the roof. They are struggling to hang on. I talked to a girl who is college educated. She has a child. She can just about afford the rent. What happens when she cannot afford it? Will the Minister answer that question? What happens when her rent resets to the market value and she cannot afford it? This is a person with a good job and a good education who does everything right. What happens to her? Where is the support? This lady will not qualify for HAP or RAS. Do you know what she told me? She said that nearly all her friends are in the same position. They are renting. They cannot get mortgages because the price of housing is so high. The price of housing is so high because the Government did not build houses for years. It left it to the market. The Government has a fascination with the idea that the market will solve the problem.

Fine Gael came up with this solution after the financial crash. Fianna Fáil should have learned from the financial crash that the one thing we cannot rely on to sort out problems in housing and health is the market. The major problems must be sorted out by government. Rents are not just unaffordable. They are crippling families. Some people will not be able to move for six years as a consequence of this legislation because, if they move, they know they will pay the new market rent wherever they go.

I talked to people who live together even though their relationships have broken up because they have nowhere to go. I have been contacted by women who are in abusive relationships, either physical or mental.

Where do they go with their kids? I have helped families in Cork to access emergency accommodation and then, within a couple of weeks, they are asked to leave because there is no capacity for them. There are consequences. When I became a TD I was told, "Thomas, you must always be aware of the unintended consequences". There are so many negative consequences to this legislation that the Minister is either not considering or he does not get.

It is not only me who is saying this. We were all in at the housing committee, including the Minister and Minister of State, and all the experts told us that rents, evictions and homelessness will increase. What will also increase is profit for the big investment funds, vulture funds and speculators. They look at Ireland and see a place where they can make a profit. It goes back to "greed is good". The Government's job is to protect people and ensure they have a safe place to live and raise their families.

The amendments call for a review and a report. The one thing I have learned since I came up here is to follow the science and the data. Figures do not lie, and what the figures have said here is that this Bill will have a catastrophic effect on rents and drive them through the roof. They are already too high.

I spoke with a lady who is on a disability payment and receiving the housing assistance payment, HAP. The only way she can keep the roof over her head is that every month, her retired father gives her money. Her rent is so high that HAP is not enough. She is on a disability payment and only for her dad, she would be homeless. I know another family in the same position. I was talking to a man who explained to me that his brothers are helping him out with the rent. He had lost his home because the property where he was living was being sold. The family had no choice but to take whatever accommodation there was. The cost of that accommodation is so high that they cannot afford it and he is being supported by his family. What will happen when, as a consequence of this Bill, rents are driven higher?

There is so much more I could say but my colleagues have touched on a lot of it. We all make mistakes in life. There but for the grace of God go all of us. The Government has made a mistake. Security of tenure for six years would be a positive step if it did not allow market rents to drive so many people out. People watching this debate realise what will happen as a consequence of this Bill finally being passed. The worry I have is the people out there tonight who do not know what the Government is doing and who will only realise the consequences of this legislation in the weeks, months or years to come. People will be left terrified and without hope.

The Government cannot sort out all the problems but what the Minister and Minister of State can do is give people hope. This Bill will not give people hope. It will give profits to the rich and super-rich and will drive ordinary working people into the hands of moneylenders. What happens when people go to moneylenders and they cannot pay the money back? Where do they go? What happens when they borrow from family and friends and that money runs out? Where do they go?

The Bill is a mistake. The Government is following the lobbyists and it is time to step back. We will work with the Government. I will leave the Minister and Minister of State with this. We will work with the Government to bring forward a Bill that will deliver housing and rents that are affordable and that will make a change for people. We can all commit to that but not to this Bill.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I wanted to get onto the housing committee. I am not a member of the committee but I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill again and support the amendments that were tabled, which relate to reviews, reports and caps. I have already said that I support the Bill in principle and the concept behind it but what is being proposed raises so many questions and concerns that, as others have mentioned, it is hugely unlikely to do what it is intended to, unless the intention is purely to increase supply and increase the profits of large developers and real estate investment trusts that are largely from outside the country.

To give an example, I see the logic of providing exemptions for new builds linked solely to the consumer price index to try to get more construction going. I get the concept that the State needs to get other people building and more supply into the market. Eventually, that supply will, hopefully, stabilise prices or bring them down but there is a huge question over the market

reset, as proposed here. There could have been a happy medium in which some form of an increase was provided but it was capped, rather than being entirely a so-called market increase, because, as others have said, housing should never be just left to the markets. It is about people's daily lives.

I have a constituent who has fallen into arrears because it took them a long time to get a housing assistance payment. They are now asking if the local authority can give them homeless HAP because the landlord has indicated that they will take the homeless HAP if the council pays and the tenant they cannot pay the rent. The council is saying, however, that it is an existing tenancy, so the person, once they are evicted, will get the homeless HAP but they are now going to have to pay a much higher rent and the State is going to have to pay a much higher rent. The cost of HAP this year will be, I think, over €570 million. If that €570 million was used to build houses, we would get between 4,000 and 6,000 houses, which is not the number of houses needed. If you were trying to develop a system, you would not have brought in HAP in the first place, but we are kind of stuck with it now. That is the problem.

As rents rise and people cannot afford to pay them, the taxpayer will essentially foot the bill. We have had various suggestions about housing, including that the State should become the single biggest developer. Successive governments have argued against that idea, saying it is not feasible, might breach the Stability and Growth Pact, etc. However, we need to look at the actual cost of housing delivery. We have not had a serious discussion about having a State real estate investment trust whereby people, through the credit union or some other means, would contribute towards the purchase or construction of housing. They would be stakeholders but it would be a social enterprise. There may be a return on the investment but it would be a lot less than the super-profits these companies are going to make. This approach would lead to affordable rents going forward because if it is left to the private market, the market will take its toll.

I will digress slightly but the same principle applies. In Lucan, South Dublin County Council, in its wisdom, did not have its social enterprise company tender for the operation of the swimming pool. Instead, it was let out to a company called Aura Leisure, which is very successful and competent in its own field. However, there was no underlying subsidy. Now we have a public pool where people are paying commercial prices because it was left up to a commercial operator to manage it. In every situation where you bring in a cut, the developer or investor will take a much bigger cut than the Government or local authority would take in terms of the common good.

*7 o'clock*

I also refer to what others have said about the incentive to end tenancies sooner than would otherwise be the case. I think Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke about the situation in relation to an extra family member.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Yes.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** There is no absolute clarity on whether a house would be deemed unsuitable because there might be, say, an extra child or a boy and girl and then all of a sudden there is overcrowding. The landlord can tick a box and they have an excuse to get

them out and then look at ways they can increase their income. Those types of unknowns are very worrying. The one I mentioned on Second Stage was the mindset of landlords trying to find a way. They might think, “Sure I have a family member. We’ll try to get them into the house for a couple of months and that will cover the family need.” I also raised the issue, which was not answered, around enforcement. How do we know the properties are meeting the family need criteria? How many extra people will be employed to investigate it, for example? I have already mentioned that the Residential Tenancies Board is massively underfunded. It is 18 months since I submitted a case about a very dodgy landlord who has multiple properties, is in breach of multiple planning regulations and is not registered with the RTB, and there has been no comeback. I am sure that situation is multiplied throughout my constituency and everyone else's as well. We do not have those checks and balances.

We have what in a sense is an attempt by the Government to do something visionary and be seen to tackle the crisis. It sets a new market rate and there is the 2% cap going forward. It looks very good in principle. However, let us take the smaller landlords, for example. I am thinking of a person who owns one property. There may be a number of TDs with one property although I know there are TDs with multiple properties where it is a business. I have been dealing with a lot of these types of landlords. From talking to people, the smaller landlord is the one who wants someone to mind the property for them. They often treat the second property as their own because they have inherited it or it is an investment so that when they are in retirement age they have a steady income. They might let a company manage it and they get a percentage of it. They would prefer to have a lower rent but with very steady tenants because, as well as the nightmare, greedy, obnoxious, unrelenting landlords, you also have a minority of tenants who are nightmare tenants. The small landlord wants an easy life and they are the type of people we should be encouraging to stay in the market and not the massive investors who are treating it as an income stream. The latter might be more efficient in terms of managing multiple property units but they will keep pushing up the prices. It is about affordability. As these smaller landlords are selling up, a lot of the homeless hubs are full and overcrowded, so when the tenant eventually finds a new place the rents have gone up massively and they may not be able to afford to pay those rents. If they are able to pay, it will be with the assistance of the local authority which in years to come will need increased HAP thresholds and payments, and that will come from taxpayers' money and State money, to keep the system going. All that money is coming from one source but it is going to the developers and the big investor funds - the institutional landlords. They are the ones siphoning our collective money away. That is why we need to look at housing as a social enterprise rather than for-profit.

This Bill does make an attempt to do a noble thing. I will not get into attacks on the Government where people say it has no compassion or that everyone is in the pockets of investors. Although historically Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have received a lot of largesse from developers, I believe that has died down as a result of legislation that has been brought in. We do still have cosy relations between politicians and developers at an individual level, however, and we have to think about having a cosier relationship with our constituents – the people who are suffering through increased prices and rents – and think about their common good and everyone's well-being. That is why I support the amendments. I support the concept of this Bill but we need to look at it more from the perspective of the individual or family living in the house rather than the people making the profit out of it.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I support amendments Nos. 2, 7 and 8 in relation to reviews and reports. The Minister and the Minister of State know what is going to happen here because we can see it already. We could see it from the moment they announced this in autumn last year. We can see what is happening – notices to quit are increasing, rents are increasing and pressure on tenants to move out is increasing. This is because many landlords – I am not putting all of them in the one box – and especially the bigger ones know that come 1 March the sky is the limit. This evening the Government is planning on ramming through this legislation. We are TDs but we are human beings as well. I ask the Minister and the Minister of State here to think about the people who are in private rented accommodation - I know some of them, and the two Ministers here know them - who are spending 50% or 55% of their total income on rent. That means there is not enough money for food, clothes, to heat the place, for their kids or a whole range of other things, and that is just the basics to get through life. I ask them to think about those people for a minute.

Three Laois TDs will have a vote on this – one Fianna Fáil TD, one Fine Gael TD and an Independent, yours truly - and I dearly wish all three of us were voting together on it. I get that the six-year certainty around tenancy is a good thing but the problem is what the Government is bringing in on the back of it. It is a Trojan Horse. It will have huge implications. My amendment, and I hope we will get to it, is around trying to limit it to 2% or the rate of inflation, the CPI. Who is the rate of inflation not good enough for? Who is 2% not good enough for? Who is lobbying for this? Is the Irish Property Owners Association getting everything it wants? Are the developers getting everything? They have got everything they want – the VAT cuts, the tax breaks and everything else they wanted.

I want to see more housing but what the Government is doing is a charter for misery and further misery. The Minister knows it and I know it because I meet these people – ordinary working people. These are couples, lone parents and all sorts of ordinary workers trying to get by. It is pensioners too. This is one coming down the line. People sitting here in ten years' time will have to deal with a tsunami of pensioners who are in private rented accommodation. The State will end up supplementing that if we do not do better about cost rental and if we do not do something to slow down rent increases. The RPZs were not perfect. They had some cooling effects but, despite them, *daft.ie* and other surveys show that rents for new tenancies in County Laois over the last two years have increased 15% to 16% over existing tenancies. If that is happening at a time when we have RPZs, what in the name of the Lord God almighty is going to happen when you remove all of this and you can say the market rent? The market rent is the highest in an area or district. The Minister knows how it is going to work. There is talk of how there will not be no-fault evictions. There will be evictions. There will be notices to quit for the simple reason, as I have pointed out numerous times, that the rents will be so high that people will not be able to afford them. The landlords who are inclined to have a rack-renting attitude face 1 March with this gift in their hands. Make no mistake - it will be used. I am not saying every landlord will use it but the rack-renting ones and the bigger ones will.

Tenants going into new apartments and housing will face extortionate increases. The tenancies do not last six years, and we know there can be a quick turnover. There is a three-year provision for students. I have a granddaughter who is going to college, and she commutes five hours a day. She would not have a hope of being able to stay near the college, and it is the same for her pals. The simple reason is that rents are already too high. What is going to happen when this comes through in the private sector?

The renters in Laois will be very hard hit. I am already seeing increases in the rent pressure zones. Despite some cooling effects, the fact is that new tenancies are already 15%, 16% or 17% higher in the last two years. A one-bedroom apartment across the road from my office was on the market for €1,750 per month. A very small house in Kilminchy was €2,100 a month. In Foxburrow, a four-bedroomed house, which was not huge, was €2,500 a month. People cannot afford that. Look at the average wage and take-home pay. Some of these people are paying for crèches and commuting, they have to make payments on two cars, and they are trying to save for deposits and do a whole range of things. They are literally strapped in trying to carry out all of this.

For those landlords who are unscrupulous, the race will be to get to the top. I support the idea of reviews and reports, but that in itself will not be enough. That is why the amendment tries to limit this to 2%. I recognise there is inflation, and I am trying to be somewhat reasonable about this. However, this will mean that all impediments to skyrocketing rents are removed. Existing tenants in homes and apartments are being put under huge pressure and will be put under more pressure due to higher rents. This measure will provide a climate for that to happen. There will be strategic notices to quit, as I said, because people will not be able to afford this.

I appeal to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs not to vote this through. This will hurt tens of thousands of tenants who are already struggling to keep their heads above water and who already have to deal with difficulties. I have never come into this House and said there is a magic wand. I know this is a complex thing to sort out. However, I also know that a number of things need to happen. Within the gift of the State is one of those things, which is to increase the supply of cost-rental housing for those who are middle aged and who will never be able to get a loan again, or perhaps those who have come out of a broken marriage. They need to be able to get into cost rental. We need to help those people and provide a not-for-profit option that will pay for itself over time. The Minister knows how it works. I remember talking about the need for cost rental here 12 or 13 years ago, when people did not know what we were talking about. I welcome the fact that the Government is moving in that direction, but we need to move more quickly. We need more of this.

The mass production of houses is a drum that I have banged loudly in this Chamber. As I said yesterday to the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, for the first time, the point has arrived with the council engineers and architects that we need to be able to mass-produce. Mass production means speeding up and reducing costs. While there has been a lot of talk from the officials in the Department about standardised design and so on, this has now gone a step further. There are real standardised plans so that houses can be the very same internally, although the outside texture can be changed if the county council wants to do that. That will enable matters to be speeded up and will remove a lot of the blockages. I say sincerely to the Minister and the Minister of State that they should do anything else they can to accelerate that. We do not want to drop standards, and I am not arguing for that. However, we need to do whatever we can to accelerate delivery and reduce costs. The money is there. We know it is taxpayers' money and we have used it well. I will certainly support anything we can do to reduce costs and increase supply.

I recognise that not all of it will be provided by the State, and I am not arguing for that. However, the State is a big player. It is because the Progressive Democrats and Fianna Fáil in

the late nineties decided that we would just opt out of social housing that we have the mess we have. We had the crash because the regulations were taken off construction and the banks, and we wound up in the situation we are in now. It is a difficult situation.

I have argued over the last 15 years to increase the number of apprentices. We must do that because we cannot build houses unless we have the people. Let us try to attract back from abroad more of the workers who went during that period and might wish to come back now. We need to increase the labour supply and ensure we have sufficient workers to build houses.

People want to save for a deposit, but they cannot do so while paying these rents. They are not affordable for young people or the cohort of middle-aged and elderly people I have referred to. I recently came across a couple who are almost 80. The local authority, Laois County Council, currently houses them. I do not mean to plámás the council, but it has really stretched itself to try to do its best. I know the Minister is there on Friday, which I welcome. It is always good to see Ministers in the constituency. The one message I would give to the Minister is to come and see what is being done. We want more of it, and we want it replicated in other parts of the country.

I ask the Minister not to force this through. The Irish Property Owners Association is getting what it wants. The developers are getting what they want. However, tenants are suffering hardship, stress and misery, as well as workers, students, lone parents and ordinary people. Let us think about those people. Let us not force through this Bill tonight. This needs to be rowed back on. We cannot heap more pressure and stress on those people.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Deputy Stanley said we should not force through this Bill tonight, and I echo that sentiment, for many reasons. I agree with the amendments that are before us. Let us be honest. I hear a lot of comments about landlords. Landlords, unfortunately, include people who just have one extra house, yet they are still classified as landlords. I think it is very unfair for such people to be called a landlord.

At the same time, I deal with landlords quite a lot. I have to deal with them. If a person is coming to you looking for a house, you are not carrying out your duty correctly if you do not speak to everybody concerned, including the council, the landlord and everybody else. Most of the landlords I speak to are decent, honest to God people. We have a real habit in this House of attacking them, as if they were all bad people. Where are we going to get the houses from? I scratch the back of my head when I hear too much criticism of landlords. Where do people think the houses are going to come from? They do not come up through the field like a mushroom in mild weather. They actually have to be built. They cost a lot of money, and people put a lot of time, effort and resources into that. Those people then need to make a genuine profit.

These are difficult circumstances. I heard the phrases "unintended consequences" and "one size does not fit all". Unfortunately, this Bill needs a lot of fine-tuning. There are elements of it that we could agree with, but there are other elements that are going to cause problems, and I can see that too. The Bill is locking thousands of tenancies permanently below the market rent. That might sound good on paper, but in the real world, it drives landlords out. The 4% reset over four years is modest, predictable and fair. It gives tenants certainty and landlords a reason to stay. If people can never move, properties leave the market and tenants lose homes. This amendment is about maintaining supply, not enriching anybody.

The Bill draws a hard line at three tenancies, with no explanation. That is completely out of step with the existing law. The Tyrrelstown amendment referred to ten units, not three. Many ordinary landlords in towns and villages exceed three units unintentionally. Raising the threshold restores consistency and fairness. Small landlords are not the enemy. They are the backbone of the rental sector, and people must keep that in mind.

I am not a landlord. I just have one house, thank God, and that is enough for me. I have been accused online of being on Airbnb. I do not know where people get this cracked-up information, but it keeps them happy, tapping away with their fingers. I have only my own home, and I live there.

Property rights do not disappear because someone rents out a home. If a landlord needs a home for a close family member, that should be respected. Grandchildren, siblings, nieces and nephews matter too. The Bill also fails families dealing with bereavement. If a landlord dies, the family should be allowed to sell the property. These amendments are about basic fairness and compassion. The Bill introduces a new criminal offence, including jail time, not for exploitation but for getting complex rent rules wrong. That is completely disproportionate and will scare decent landlords out of the market. Regulation should be firm but it also must be fair. Heavily criminalising people is not a way forward. There are unintentional consequences.

I have been very vocal on the short-term lets in recent weeks. This is going to have devastating consequences for short-term lets, Airbnbs in small rural communities. The 20,000 cap came in yesterday, which is very much to be welcomed, but the bottom line is that people still require planning. I would say 98% or 99% of them are running for the last 20 or 30 years. They did not have or need planning. They were quite happy running their business and everything was above board. They had fire safety and all that checked, insurance and everything. Planning is a different game. I was at the committee meeting today, and the planning authority and the tourism board are all over the place. They do not know what they are doing here. The Minister needs to intervene on this matter. I have no problem with regulation. I had a public meeting last Friday and I have another one tomorrow night in Clonakilty on this issue. The rooms are packed. People are concerned they are going to lose their honest incomes. This Bill has unintended consequences.

The Minister could look at our amendment, which is a waiver for people who were in business. Any new Airbnbs will have to be fully compliant. That is quite acceptable. Registration is not an issue with them. Communities do not have hotels so they dip in on the Airbnbs to bring tourists into the community. This Bill has positive points. I think it is being rushed through here, not just tonight but in general. It needs to be looked at again. Short-term letting is a very serious area. We welcome the change yesterday of the 20,000 cap but I still think there needs to be more changes here, because people require full planning, and they will. To be compliant, there are two boxes, have you planning or not. I know some people who are 30 years in operation or 40. My mother was doing Airbnb in Schull in the 1970s, believe it or not, although now she has passed on. Everybody loves to visit rural areas. The point is that many people, most of them females - farmers and people who need a little bit of a side income and try to work at home and do this business - are doing it for survival and now they are faced with the dreadful consequences of having to apply for planning permission, which will devastate their business. I would like the Minister to look at that area again. I would plead with every Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Independent TD not to vote for this until this confusion

has been resolved. I do not think they are going to listen to me but I have to push from my angle to the best of my ability. The clock is ticking on this new legislation and we desperately need changes. Airbnb is hugely important and short-term lets are hugely important to people out there. They are contacting each of us in their thousands throughout the country. There are unintended consequences and it needs changing. My worry is if we push through this legislation tonight, the planning legislation is there, it is in place and it has to be acted on and it will be for the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, to work on it. That is going to be landing on his desk next week, I am told. If this goes the way it seems to be going, we could see Airbnb as we know it ending in rural communities.

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** As we know, we live in a housing crisis. That is a supply crisis. We have a rental crisis which is a supply crisis, and we have a homelessness crisis which is a supply crisis. What we are endeavouring to do here is strengthen tenants' rights, which we are doing through security of tenure, which means tenants will know how long they can stay in a property, while driving investment. I say to Deputy Hearne that investment is not a dirty word. We need private investment.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I never said it was.

**Deputy James Browne:** You stand up here and you are constantly attacking anything to do with investment. You seem to believe that bandying around the words "landlord" or "investment" is enough mud to keep throwing.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** It is not mud; it is the reality.

**Deputy James Browne:** Nobody in this House has a monopoly on empathy.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** This Bill lacks it.

**Deputy James Browne:** We are trying to solve what is a housing crisis driven by a supply crisis. What have we heard from the Opposition? Have we heard a single solution? The Deputies' only proposal - Deputy Boyd Barrett referred to misery - is to freeze the housing crisis into a permanent misery. That is what they are looking to do.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** We want evidence for this legislation.

**Deputy James Browne:** What they want to do is keep the current situation in perpetuity. What I need to do to solve the housing crisis is not simply about protecting existing renters. It is about all those people at home who need somewhere to live.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** They will not be able to afford to be in it.

**Deputy James Browne:** That means driving the supply of homes in this country. We have delivered more social homes in 2024 than in any year since the 1970s. We have delivered

record affordable homes and last year we delivered over 36,000 new homes, the highest since 2011. We have to drive the supply and that needs investment. The Government is investing the largest amount of money in the history of the State into housing delivery. One in every three euro of the new national development plan capital funding is going into delivering housing. That is record funding. The State cannot deliver every housing solution. We need a significant amount of private investment. While we are doing this, we also have to protect renters. For the first time in the history of the State, we are introducing security of tenure. That is what the Deputies are going to vote against.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Not for existing renters. You give no protection to existing renters.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** It is not true.

**Deputy James Browne:** For those who are currently in a rental situation, their position does not change - for 240,000 renters it does not change.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** They are still as vulnerable to no-fault evictions.

**Deputy James Browne:** On the one hand, you want it to stay the same, on the other hand you want change.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** No, I said very clearly and we say clearly, a ban on no-fault evictions.

**Deputy James Browne:** In a single sentence earlier, Deputy Hearne said that the landlords are licking their lips, and that they are also getting out. At least when Deputy Ó Broin makes a hypocritical statement he sandwiches it to try to hide it a little bit. You just actually said it in a single sentence. It makes no sense.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** It does absolutely. It is not a hypocritical statement; it is reality.

**Deputy James Browne:** It is just word spaghetti in the hope that something lands or when you leave the Chamber you have got 20 seconds for your social media.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** That is disgraceful. What the Minister does not care about is people who are going to suffer these rents. We are not doing this as 20 seconds for social media. That is disgraceful.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I would love if my amendment was addressed. I would love that.

**Deputy James Browne:** What we have to do is provide housing solutions. We have to drive the supply of homes if we are going to solve the housing crisis in this country.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** That is a disgrace. Withdraw that.

**Deputy James Browne:** That is what we are doing, while also providing, as I say, for the first time in the history of the State, security of tenure. That is the crucial part we are doing here. Deputies do not have to like everything in the legislation but they are going to vote against security of tenure. That is what they are going to do.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** We are voting against rent increases.

**Deputy James Browne:** For the first time people will have the confidence of knowing, in the case of large landlords, effectively they can stay there forever. They know they will be able to do it.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** They will not be able to afford to rent.

**Deputy James Browne:** There are certain exceptions for smaller landlords but they still know they will have at least six years. We know the greatest driver of homelessness is notices to quit. We are going to give security of tenure-----

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** But not to existing renters. At least have the honesty to accept that.

**Deputy James Browne:** -----so people can put down roots, so people can feel safe and know what their personal situation is. I think it is quite cynical actually, the Opposition here. The Deputies are united in cynicism against this legislation. We cannot do nothing. If we do what the Opposition wants to do, which is freeze rents and have an eviction ban, it does not even retain the *status quo*, it is actually going to get worse because our population is increasing by about 70,000 to 90,000 people a year. If we do not increase supply at all-----

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Build affordable housing. You are the one who is doing the false choice. Hypocrisy.

**Deputy James Browne:** -----if we freeze the situation as the Opposition wants to do, that is the situation. We are delivering record affordable housing. In 2024 we delivered the largest amount of social housing since the 1970s and we will have the 2025 social housing numbers quite soon as well. That is what we are doing here. We want to solve the housing crisis. That is what we are working towards. I get what the Opposition is doing. It is playing on the fears and emotions of those people who are in a rental situation. We do not have that luxury. It is actually quite cynical to do it. What we are doing is making the tough, difficult decisions-----

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** To increase rents.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** The Minister still has not addressed my amendment.

**Deputy James Browne:** -----to drive the supply of the homes that we need. We have heard nothing from the Opposition about how it would actually drive the supply of homes in this country.

A number of comments were made. Deputy Stanley asked why rents are going up in Laois. Again, it is because of the lack of supply. The only way that people in Laois will get homes to live in is by the supply of homes being increased. That is absolutely crucial right across the country. Record numbers of social houses have been delivered since the 1970s. The *status quo* only makes things worse. Why are we doing this? It is actually not being done in a hurry. We announced what we would be doing here today last summer. The Bill underwent pre-legislative scrutiny. There has been loads of time to analyse it. We are having a five-hour debate on it here tonight. There was ample time for people to assess the Bill and make-----

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** The Minister has not answered the question about whether rents are going to come down.

**Deputy James Browne:** -----a consideration as to when we do it.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** When will rents come down?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly):** Deputy Hearne will have an opportunity to come back in.

**Deputy James Browne:** The one thing that is guaranteed is that the rents are not going to come down if the Deputy's party continues with its policies..

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I do not have policies. The Minister is the one who is in government.

**Deputy James Browne:** We know that. That is exactly the point. You have no policies.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I do not have the means to implement policies. When are the rents going to come down?

**Deputy James Browne:** All you have are slogans.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly):** We will not have a back-and-forth, Minister. If the Deputies let the Minister finish, they will have the opportunity to come back in. The Minister should direct his comments through the Chair.

**Deputy James Browne:** A Freudian slip from the Deputy there.

We are driving on and addressing the housing crisis. We want to solve it in order that we can get people into the homes they need. That is why we are driving on with building social homes, affordable homes and private homes. It is also why we are bringing in stronger protections for tenants.

In relation to the amendments, Standing Order 204 states the following:

Twelve months following the enactment of a Bill, save in the case of the Finance Bill and the Appropriation Bill, the member of the Government or Minister of State who is officially

responsible for implementation of the Act shall provide a report which shall review the functioning of the Act and which shall be laid in the Parliamentary Library.

This means that automatic reviews of legislation always happen.

We have increased the resources of the RTB by 70% this year alone. The board will support tenants and ensure that their rights are protected. CSO figures show that there was a 38% increase in apartments in 2025 compared with 2024. Our policies are working; we are going to drive supply and that is how we will solve the housing crisis, the rental crisis and the homelessness crisis. Simply putting the crisis that exists into a permanent freeze will not solve it. Peddling misery will not solve it either.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Sometimes, what the Minister does not say is more revealing than what he does say. I stated earlier that on the basis of data from the Residential Tenancies Board, within 12 months of the enactment of this Bill, anywhere in the region of 60,000 households will be impacted by the market reset. The Minister has not challenged that. In any of the radio or TV debates I have taken part in, nobody has challenged it. This means that the Minister is accepting the RTB's data that over the next 12 months at least 60,000 households - single people, families and children - will be impacted by his decision. The other interesting thing that the Minister did not respond to is the analysis of the Residential Tenancies Board's data actually detailing the increase in rent for those households in the coming months. It will mean an average of an extra €3,000 a month. In the Minister's constituency, it will be a little lower, at €2,500 a year. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan has joined us. In his country of Cork, what he will be voting in favour of this evening, based on the data from the Residential Tenancies Board-----

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** Extending RPZs.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I know it might be difficult to hear the real-world financial consequences of what he will be voting for, but in Cork, the extra rent that will be imposed on new tenancies from 1 March in a year will be €3,100 across the city and county. In the city specifically, it will be almost €4,000. I will ask the Minister a very simple question. How is increasing rents in every county in the State going to contribute to increasing the kind of supply needed in every county? Is the Minister of State seriously suggesting that incentivising private institutional investors with record rents will lead to the delivery of apartments to meet the needs of his constituents in County Cork? Of course it will not.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** We have extended the RPZs in the county to cover areas that never had protection.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Minister of State knows that the only investors who are interested in these kinds of rents are those - the Minister of State was not here earlier so I will repeat it for his benefit - who might invest in the docklands area of Cork and in very high-end, high-cost parts of Dublin. The Minister and the Minister of State are going to ask their constituents to pay somewhere in the region of an extra €3,000 per year for new tenancies. The Minister had an opportunity to dispute the RTB data and he chose not to. If he wants to dispute it, I will be more than interested in hearing his analysis. The Minister and the Minister of State are

going to ask new renters in their constituencies to pay additional rent of in the region of €3,000 per year in the absence of extra supply in those constituencies. The very particular category of institutional investors that the Minister is talking about are not coming to County Cork or County Wexford anytime soon.

I want to rebut the Minister's assertion. We are here dealing with his legislation. If he wants to have a debate about our solutions, that is fine. We will do it any day he likes, but I will deal with some of them now. This is the Committee Stage debate on the Government's legislation and impact it is going to have on real people in real time in the months ahead. The Minister keeps saying that this rent hike Bill, coupled with the reduction in apartment design standards and the massive tax break for apartment builders is going to lead to a dramatic increase in supply. I have not heard anybody in the industry say that. It will increase some level of supply in certain parts of Dublin and Cork but nowhere else. The cost of that supply is going to be so expensive that the working people many of us represent will not be able to afford it. We need to increase supply and we need to increase social supply. The Government keeps trotting out the line about building more social homes than at any time since the 1970s. In the 1970s, the population of the country was half what it is now. Our social housing waiting lists were a fraction of what they are today. If we make an honest assessment between the position now and that which obtained in the 1970s, we can see that we are delivering less than half of what was delivered then *per capita* and even less in proportion to need. This is despite the fact that this State has more money than ever before and a capacity to deliver.

The Minister also accused us of protecting existing renters. Some 20,000 existing renters get notices of termination every year. These people are now going to have to find other rental accommodation. As a consequence, they will have to pay additional rent. What is happening simply makes no sense. A claim has been made to the effect that security of tenure is being introduced for the first time. Darragh O'Brien came in here in 2023 and said he was introducing tenancies of indefinite duration. He misled this House, because they were not indefinite. Likewise, the Minister is not for the first time introducing security of tenure. The Residential Tenancies Act 2004 involved an element of security of tenure, but there were so many loopholes that many tenants were left behind. Darragh O'Brien's tenancies of indefinite duration had so many loopholes that the same thing happened.

Let us look at the Minister's proposals here. New tenants in properties owned by small landlords can still be evicted if the landlord or a spouse needs the property. They can still be evicted on the grounds of financial hardship, ill-defined as it is, or in the context of the need to discharge a debt. Here is the really important one that the Minister did not mention. They can be evicted if they cannot afford the rent. That ground remains in place. If somebody enters into a tenancy at the new market rent and is then hit with 2% or CPI each year, whichever the lowest, and if at any point in the following five years or six years they fall into rent arrears, they will be evicted. The Minister of State is smirking at that remark. Maybe he was not here in this House, when in 2014, 2015 and 2016 huge numbers of families were evicted from their homes because they could not afford double-digit rent increases. That was the reality. That is what drove family homelessness right across this State in those years.

If the Minister of State thinks that is funny or something to smirk about, that is okay-----

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** Where is the Deputy getting that from?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----but what the Government is proposing and what it is going to---  
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**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** The Deputy is concocting scenarios now that do not even exist. What is he talking about? He is trying to say that I am smirking or laughing. That is absolutely ridiculous.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Minister of State was smirking.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly):** It is not a back-and-forth.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I am quite happy to engage. If this was a proper Committee Stage debate, we would be able to have these types of engagements. That is one of the things we have been denied.

Let us be very clear. Double-digit rental inflation leaves renters unable to pay their rent. They get into rent arrears, they get a notice of termination for non-payment of rent and they get evicted. That is what happens. What is the Government proposing for new renters in County Carlow? Potential rent increases in the first year of 29%. For County Cavan, it is 29%. For County Clare, it is 26.9%. For Cork, including the county, it is 25%. The figure for the city is 20%. It goes on and on. In the context of the market reset, not a single county or city will have a rent increase in the first year of less than 17% or 18%. For some, it will be as high as 35%. That is what the Government is proposing. If the Minister is right and this leads to an increase in supply at some point - let us imagine that thesis is correct - who made him to think that it is acceptable for renters to have to pay the extortionate rents necessary to bring about that increase? It beggars belief that the Minister cannot be at least honest and say in order to attract the very specific kind of institutional investment that the Government believes is necessary, it is going to have to have ever greater rip-off rents which, like existing rents, people simply cannot afford. I will come to the alternative and to private sector investment in a moment

The Minister also likes to say that people on this side of this House have nothing to say about private sector investment. In fact, I have probably spent more time talking about alternative and better forms of private sector investment than the Minister. The missing piece of our private sector housing crisis is not high-end, high-density, high-cost private rental. That is not our problem. The missing part is a failure on the part of the Government to support and activate the small and medium-sized builder-developer sector to build significantly more good-quality private homes at more moderated prices in every county in the State. The Government could deal with that by fixing the problems facing the sector. Action in that regard is entirely absent. The Minister repeated a line used by the Taoiseach to the effect that the 240,000 tenancies currently in place will not be impacted. What the Government completely ignores in this regard is the RTB data I quoted at the outset to the effect that for every quarter for the past two and half years, 25% of all registered tenancies have been new first-time tenancies. The private rental sector is in a state of constant churn for a variety of reasons. If those trends continue, within four years, almost all tenants in the private rental sector will be captured by the market reset. Ultimately, some will not be captured until year six, but that is what the Government is proposing.

It has been stated that the greatest driver of homeless is the crisis in the private rental sector. In fact, that is not strictly true. The greatest driver of homelessness is the failure of the State over the past number of decades, including under this Government, to deliver a volume of social homes to meet the needs of people who need social housing. The lack of such homes forces people into the private rental sector for extended periods. When they eventually become homeless, they remain in emergency accommodation for far too long. Again, this is because of the Government's failure to provide adequate social housing.

There are plenty of solutions on this side of this House. However, what the Minister has ignored and has tacitly accepted is that tens of thousands of renters in new tenancies from the start of March are going to be hit with rent increases of the order of €3,000 to €5,000 annually. That is what the data from the Residential Tenancies Board indicates. I would happily give the Minister an hour of my speaking time because I would love him to outline the analysis of this that allows him to shake his head. His officials told us that they were not asked to produce any analysis to underpin this Bill. The Housing Agency was not asked to produce any analysis to underpin this Bill either. None of the academic experts in our universities who specialise in the private rental sector were asked to carry out an analysis. Unless the Minister has an analysis that he has been hiding from us all, then either the RTB data is correct and he must accept it and live by it or he has to produce something else.

We are going to go through other aspects of the Bill as we proceed. I would have thought that the Minister would at least have been honest enough to say that the primary purpose of the Bill is to allow rents to rise. That the Government has made a calculated assessment in order to attract a certain category of institutional investment, that those involved want rental yields even greater than what the new private sector stock is getting now and that the Government has said "That is no problem. Off you go."

The Minister is right that there was an increase in the number of apartment completions last year. Almost all of those apartments were bought by the State. Virtually no new private sector investment acquired any of them. Therefore, the idea that somehow the completion figures, including those relating to apartments, for the end of last year are in any way a justification for what is happening is simply unbelievable.

I am going to make a wager. In six months, let us come back and have a debate on the impact of this Bill. In 12 months, if the Minister is still in office, he should come back in here and we will have a debate. Schedule such a debate and allocate Government time.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** Look at the review.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I invite the Minister to come back in here and prove that we were wrong and that he was right. If the Minister has the courage of his convictions and if he had a credible analysis of the Bill, which he does not, he would agree to that without doubt. We cannot even get the Minister into a television studio to debate with us on any of these matters, so I doubt that he would be willing to give the time for a debate here. As the month-on-month and quarter-on-quarter figures come in, we are going to see the consequences of the Government's policy. How do we know that? We know because we have been here before. Deputy Boyd Barrett is the longest-serving TD dealing with housing on the Opposition benches. I am not far behind him. Simon Coveney made all the same promises.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I could name a few Ministers before him.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Eoghan Murphy made all the same promises. It is almost like Groundhog Day. What happened? Homelessness, rents and house prices rose, and the right kind of supply never materialised. The Minister's party colleague Darragh O'Brien probably made more promises than anybody else. It was a case of "Darragh gets it done", as Oliver Callan used to say in his sketches. What happened? The Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, might tell us what happened while Darragh O'Brien was Minister.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** I was not listening.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I will tell him what happened. Homelessness rose. I know it is funny. I know the Minister of State thinks it is hilarious. As a consequence of the policies of the Minister of State's party, real people ended up in emergency accommodation who should never have ended up there. That is the consequences of what you guys do, and you are doing it again. You are doing it in a far more serious manner than you have done in a decade. That is why none of us on this side of the House will make any apologies for highlighting the real-world impacts on real people of the Government's legislation.

The Government can try to distract all it wants when it comes to social media clips in a way that makes it seem as if nobody on the Government benches uses social media. The Minister seems to be getting a little better at it. Social media clips do not hide rising homelessness numbers. They do not hide rising rents. They do not hide a Government that continues to miss almost all of its targets. I look forward to debating the social and affordable housing output figures for 2025 when they are eventually released. I suspect the targets in that regard will have been missed as well.

This is terrible legislation. It is going to have profoundly negative impacts on tens of thousands of people. The fact that the Minister cannot even acknowledge that or respond to the factual information we have put to him shows that despite my very generous colleague's assertion to the contrary, the Minister has not made any mistake at all. He is doing this deliberately. He is doing it knowingly. While he might be hiding from the evidence, he is doing this because he has chosen to do it in full knowledge of the consequences and the cost. Shame on both the Minister and Minister of State for doing this.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** The Minister did not meaningfully address my amendments in his response to them. He spoke about Standing Order 197. The types of reports referenced under that Standing Order came in as part of political reform in 2011. They are often delayed, sometimes for two, three or four years in respect of certain legislation. God knows where we will be four years from now. There is no proper, thorough and standardised approach to how these reports are done. In 2017, the Oireachtas Library and Research Service did a very good analysis of the reports. It found they had been done in a very *ad hoc* way and that no committee has undertaken a review of any enacted legislation on foot of a post-enactment report.

The reason I brought forward these amendments is that we know the Bill will cause rents to increase. The fact the Minister has not challenged that assertion in any of his responses is telling. It will become too politically difficult for the Government to sustain a situation where

rents are allowed to be reset to market rate and to increase by anything up to 15%. If we are not back here discussing this next year, we certainly will be back here before the local elections. Where will we be then? Will people be paying €3,000 a month in rent? In fact, on *daft.ie* right now, there is a two-bedroom apartment just around the corner from this building that is for rent for more than €3,000.

What will happen as a result of this Bill is that if we get any new supply at all, it will largely comprise build-to-rent units that most ordinary working people cannot afford. There certainly will not be any supply in Limerick city, which I represent. Large institutional investors will not get enough of a yield from building expensive build-to-rent apartments there because there is no demand for them. The Minister talked about record investment but the outcomes of that investment are, by and large, incredibly poor. I am always astonished when I hear members of the Government talking about affordable housing provision, given that approximately 35% of what is counted as affordable housing actually comes from vacant property refurbishment grants.

The Minister has not addressed my simple question as to what the forecasted impact of this Bill will be on rents in the private rental market for the rest of 2026, for 2027 and for 2028. The fact he is pushing this legislation through without being able to answer that question is frightening. I agree with him about the need for increased supply and for private sector investment, but this Bill will not deliver anywhere near the level of private sector investment needed to meet housing need, particularly in areas outside Dublin and very niche parts of Cork. The reality is that for every year since 2021, the Government has been 2,000 units or more below its completion targets. It will fail again this year to meet the target.

The Minister referred to the crisis in the rental market and the homelessness crisis. I always think of the key recommendation of the Housing Commission that social and affordable housing should make up 20% of all housing stock. At present, that proportion is around 10%. The fact the Government has not met the targets it has set itself since Housing for All was introduced in 2021 really highlights that it is looking in the wrong place for a solution to the problem. This Bill will not improve the situation. It certainly will not arrest rising rents or rising homelessness. The Minister should lay before the House a report setting out exactly the modelling for the Bill. We have all gone through the RTB figures and done the calculations. The evidence, as it has been laid out by me and by other speakers, is absolutely frightening. These measures will devastate renters, who are the most vulnerable people in the housing system at the moment.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I really am furious at the Minister's comments that this debate is about social media clips. It diminishes the seriousness of what is at stake here. I have been a Member of this House since 2011. I was here two or three months when a circular was produced by the then Department of the environment, within which responsibility for housing was a matter for a Minister of State rather than having a Ministry in its own right. That was because we did not then have the homelessness and housing crisis we have now. The need for housing to come under a senior Ministry arose from the housing crisis that commenced a few years later.

There was no fanfare and no press releases from the then Fine Gael-Labour Party in respect of the circular of 2011. It basically said the Government was stopping direct capital investment

in public housing and would instead outsource its provision. The word "HAP" did not appear at that point but it was the beginning of the idea. RAS was in place at the time but HAP had not yet arrived. I remember putting out a press release and holding a press briefing, which only one journalist attended. I tried to explain that the Government was proposing, in effect, to do away with the direct provision of social housing and that this would be a disaster. I remember when HAP was introduced during the term of the then Minister of State, Jan O'Sullivan. The debate in this House went on for hours as we tried to explain why the scheme was going to be a disaster because it would replace social housing provision by the State with outsourcing of provision to the private sector. Of course, that turned out to be the case.

The other big feature of that policy was the then Minister for Finance, Michael Noonan, meeting with representatives of the vulture funds that were invited in to buy up all the distressed property. It was a deliberate policy. He met with people from 65 or so vulture funds in 2013 and basically asked them to take over all the distressed property in the hands of NAMA. We said it would be a disaster. For a brief while, the then Government had the housing sector in its hands. If it had started building public and affordable housing then instead of doing the exact opposite, we would not be in this mess at all. It had the assets and so on.

A point worth making regarding foreign private investment is that the houses that are built are built by labour in this country. When talking about capital from abroad, all the money is digits on a computer screen but the homes are built on land here, by people here and with materials sourced here. Those people are either building stuff that is affordable, like social and affordable housing, or they are building to make a profit, which is what is happening at the moment. What they are building is unaffordable. Of course, they are building hotels and things like that as well because it is profitable to do so. Forgetting about all the digital figures floating around, there is a finite amount of labour, land and materials, regardless of whether it is being used to build affordable and social housing or to build something else. It was often not doing anything at all because, for periods of time, the people who controlled the land, the labour and the capital decided they would not build anything until it was profitable enough to do so, and that is what they did.

*8 o'clock*

A lot of the people who got the distressed assets from NAMA at a discount price sat on them or leaked the stuff very slowly. This is a very important point that the Minister needs to understand. Never, ever, are the investors he is looking to court, lure and incentivise here going to build to the point that their profits go down. Why would they? At the point at which they think their profits are going to go down, they are going to stop. That is what they will do. The idea that we will get to a magical point somewhere where rents and house prices go down somehow is just total fantasy. The only instance of that is a massive crash. That is what we actually got the last time we had this mad policy of dancing to the investors' tune. It never really stopped but the dire crash of 2008 resulted from this madness of doing what they tell the Government. Then the housing crisis ensued. At that time, for example, it was unknown, for me in Dún Laoghaire and for most people in the country, to have families with kids in emergency accommodation. It just never happened. There was a particular profile to people who were in emergency accommodation. They were often very vulnerable. You did not have families with kids in homeless accommodation when I first came into the Dáil. Now, it is absolutely normalised and it will increase because of this. Then, the Minister comes forward

with a Bill and says, to use his own words, "We do not want rents for long-term tenancies to fall behind market rents". That is the purpose of this Bill. Under no circumstances must we have low rents. That is what the Minister is saying.

**Deputy James Browne:** That is not what that says.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Minister said, "We do not want rents for long-term tenancies to fall behind market rents".

**Deputy James Browne:** Market rents can go down-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** That means low rents are intolerable; we have to have them higher.

**Deputy James Browne:** The Deputy should not be misleading. Markets can go up as well as down.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Ah, stop.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** That is in plain English. Just in case there was any doubt about the motive, at the beginning of this year, the Minister, Deputy Lawless, when discussing the Government's thinking, said:

... housing is about international markets. It is actually a spreadsheet in Zurich, New York or Antwerp, more so than a builder looking at a site in Longford or Roscommon, that is actually deciding what happens here.

The point is, it should be the builder in Roscommon or Dublin or wherever it is, looking at the land we have that is zoned, available, serviced and so on. They should be looking at the labour we have available and saying we need houses for the people in this community, so let us build them. If we could do it in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s on a pretty big scale, when the country was virtually a third-world country, we can certainly do it now with enormous budget surpluses and record economic growth. If we look at the Central Bank figures on wealth, I think household wealth in this country is €1.3 trillion now, with about half of it sitting in the banks. The credit unions were banging down the Government's door for years saying they had €4 billion or €5 billion they were willing to put into housing, no problem.

On the idea that we do not have suggestions, People Before Profit produced a policy document a few years ago titled, A State Construction Company. Two other parties have similar views on a State construction company. Let us build on the land we have and employ people directly. Rather than them building unaffordable stuff, let us have them build affordable stuff.

It is unbelievable what the Government is doing with this Bill in terms of the position of tenants. I would defy any tenant at the end of this to know what sort of tenant they are. Are they a tenant of a big landlord or of a small landlord? Are they a student tenant? There are different rules for them. Are they a tenant post-March 2026 or pre-2026? Even for pre-2026 tenants, there is a different demarcation depending on whether the tenancy is from before or

after 2022. We are going to have great fun trying to figure out even what sort of tenants we are talking about and what position they are in. The landlords, however, will know there is an incentive to get these tenants out so they can reset the rents up to the highest possible level. That will mean going on *daft.ie* and seeing if they can find three rents at €2,500, €3,000, or whatever price. That will be the result of all this.

What are we saying? We are saying rents should be based on the ability of people to pay. We are saying people should not be evicted when they have done nothing wrong or, for that matter, as is the case now for lots of people, because they cannot afford unaffordable rents. People should not be evicted for not being able to afford unaffordable rents when more than €24,000 in after-tax income is required to pay the average rent in Dublin now. This is after-tax income, so €33,000 or €34,000 gross of a renter's income has to go to pay an average rent in Dublin. What are we talking about there? It is more than 50% of average earnings. If people cannot pay that, and in many cases it is much higher than that, is it their fault if they get evicted? It is not really, is it? It is the Government's fault that it has let rents go up to that level.

Is what we are saying when we say keep rents down to particular levels really so off the charts that nobody else is doing it? Just to be clear, we want to reset rents downward, not just freeze them. I will mention four cities where rent control works. Vienna has a system of rent ceilings so rents cannot be put above a certain level. Some 43% of all the housing in Vienna is social housing and it has hard limits on rent increases. They have rents per square metre which are a fraction of ours - about a third of what people are paying here on average. In Stockholm, a renters' union negotiates the rents on a regular basis with the landlords, rent controls are used to set price ceilings and rents are set based on the utility value of the property. Without those rent controls, it is estimated that rents would be 68% higher in Stockholm than they currently are. Where else has rent controls? Barcelona has them. Rent increases are limited and they have ceilings and so on. Rent controls work there, and Berlin also has rent controls.

The things we are proposing, and propose time and again, can be and are done elsewhere. The Government just does not want to do it because it and the landlords find it difficult that they cannot put rents up to the highest possible level. It, therefore, wants to pass legislation that will ensure landlords can do so, despite the housing misery that is causing for people. I think about the families who come in to me - I am sure they must come in to the Minister - saying it is their second year in emergency accommodation and they have been told they are 200th on the housing list. There is no chance of them getting a council house for at least seven or eight years. They are told to go out and find a HAP property. That means finding a property within the homeless HAP rate. They might be allowed to look for something for, say, €2,000 a month. No such thing exists. Imagine how hopeless people feel. They are told to go out and find something within that limit but it does not actually exist out there. Now, the Government is going to make that even more hopeless because people will be looking for rents of €2,500 or €3,000 a month, putting them in an even more hopeless position. For those few people who got a HAP tenancy but are paying a top-up - if they are on a social housing list, they would have to pay a top-up to get a HAP tenancy these days - this has already put them in a difficult position and it is threatening to drive them into arrears at any time.

If there are any difficulties in their situation, any extra costs come in for kids or anything like that, they could easily find themselves in difficulty, but now those rents are going to go up. Almost certainly, the HAP rates will not go up to match that. Even if they do, it just means the

State is now paying for it. Anyway, they will not go up to the level, so they will be in even more difficulty paying these unaffordable rents. That means they are going to get into trouble, people are going to get into arrears and they are going to get evicted as a result. That is what is actually going on.

I do not know how the Minister can possibly justify this. The reason we are here, angry and talking about it is not because we want a social media clip. It is because, next week and in the months after, we are going to have to deal with the human misery that comes through the doors of our offices as a result of what he is doing. That is the reason we are speaking about this and proposing that he abandon this Bill and actually listen to what others are saying. The Government has had its chance and has failed on housing. Maybe it might consider looking at some of the alternative proposals being put forward from this side.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I am here to speak on behalf of tenants and renters in towns in Laois like Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Portarlinton, Mountrath, Rathdowney, Graiguecullen, Stradbally and so on. I am meeting people regularly, daily sometimes, who are struggling because of the situation with housing and the high rents they are paying. The Government is bringing in a measure. We have heard the RTB projections in the debate. The Minister can contradict them if he likes. It knows, and the people who look for this know, that this is going to lead to a further increase. The market keeps getting talked about, the altar of the market. The high priests at the altar are the landlords, developers and vulture funds. They are there as the high priests.

During previous terms of the Government being in power, sometimes with the Progressive Democrats, that brought us to the Celtic tiger, we saw what the deregulation of the building industry did when we allowed people to self-certify. The taxpayer is cleaning up that bill in the form of the mica Bill and the financial bill for it and in the form of fire remedies in apartments. If I heard right, I think it is 20,000 apartments, a lot of them in Dublin, because of what the Government did at that time. The taxpayer picks up the bill - Joe and Mary Public. I want to represent those people who are paying that.

I have been a Member of this House for 15 years, like Deputy Boyd Barrett. This week or last week we were here 15 years. This is one of the worst pieces of legislation and one of the most dangerous I have seen. That is why I am speaking passionately about this. I feel strongly about this and I am really concerned. I am not going to personalise anything and I am not looking to have a go at anybody, but I am concerned about what the Government is doing here. I told the Government to look back at when it adored the altar of the market in the early 2000s as we went through the Celtic tiger. Look at the mess it left behind. We are still cleaning up that mess. The taxpayer is cleaning it up. We are still paying the interest on the bank bailout from that time. We are still paying the bill for the mica scandal. We are still going to pay the bill for the fire remedies in all those apartments that people have mortgages on and they are renting in unsafe apartments around Dublin. I looked at one. One was on television. I think it was last night. The outside of it was covered in timber. You would think about Grenfell Tower. I am saying this honestly to the Minister and Minister of State. Who in the name of God allowed that to happen? Talk about a tinder-box. That is the conclusion we came to when looking at a repeat of the programme last night. I think it was a "Prime Time" programme in relation to the timber cladding on the outside of it. Dry timber was on the outside of it and no fire breaks were inside. That is what the Government allowed.

The Government allowed the banks to give out money. I have met people who got loans from banks who never should have got them. There were loan consultants in banks. These jack-the-lads were smart lads. They were supposed to be smarter than the rest of us. They gave money to people who did not have the capacity to repay it. Why? The high altar of the market was adored and the high priests at it told the Government this was what was needed to do it, Seán Fitz and the boys. That is what happened. I am thinking of one couple. They have been dealing with it for 12 years in Laois trying to keep them in the house they are in, and if not, trying to get them into social housing. They have had a notice to quit from Pepper hanging over them for 12 years. It has employed Mars Capital, Eversheds and all sorts of arm-twisters and debt collectors to try to turn the screws on these two people to get them out of where they are, who should never have received a loan. If you were a member of the loan committee on the credit union, you would not give them one tenth of what they got as a loan. I am saying that honestly. It is the high altar of the market.

The Minister says, and stated repeatedly, that if we increase supply, we will have loads of houses and be able to reduce rent. I ask him to go back and look at the data from the last time his party was in government for a sufficiently long term. I am saying this to him honestly, just to be factual about it. Did rents go down in 2005 or 2006, the year we built 94,000 houses? Did rents go down in 2007? No, they did not. Supply shot up. We had loads of houses. In fact, we did not have people to fill some of them. Rents did not go down. I can think of all the estates around where I live. I live in the middle of a whole lot of new estates. I can think of those estates where the rents shot up. Some houses were empty. Landlords, developers and speculators who bought them were willing to wait for people to come along and rent them. They kept the rents high. That is what they did. They eventually got it.

At the moment, unless the Minister is in a parallel universe to me, the people who I meet who are renting are already in serious hardship. They are paying a lot more, in most cases, than what people are paying on mortgages. That is a fact. Laois has around 13,000 people commuting out of it every morning. Along with paying for the car to get to work, mainly in Dublin or Naas or somewhere, along with that, they are paying for childminding and a whole range of things. They are already living a very difficult life. I can tell the Minister it is no fun. I am here to try to represent and put this to the Minister. If I do not do this tonight, I am neglecting my duties as a Teachta Dála. I am appealing to the Minister on this.

If the Minister takes off whatever cooling effect the RPZs and the current status has, despite which, as I told the Minister earlier, rents on new lets in Laois have nonetheless gone up by over 16% in one survey and 15% in another compared with existing tenancies - the figures are there; they are not my figures - what is going to happen after 1 March? We need to stabilise rents. That requires rent limits. I have put in a reasonable proposal in my amendment that they would not go beyond 2% per year or inflation through the consumer price index, whichever is the lower. That is reasonable. We need to have some limits on it. We need to increase the amount of cost rentals. It is tiny at the moment. I welcome what is happening. I welcome the fact that the Government is moving on that and on affordable housing, but it is not enough and it is not quick enough.

That needs to be accelerated. We cannot create a situation where people will suffer more hardship, misery and stress. There will be more evictions.

One other effect of what the Government is going to do that has not been talked about is the wealth transfer to landlords and big developers. What will happen is when rents go up, it means HAP will have to go up and have to chase that increase in rent. This is a point the Government needs to take on board. The Minister and Minister of State will see the figures for last year on how much is spent on leasing, HAP and homeless accommodation. It is a huge part of the housing budget. I want to see the housing budget used well and to see us getting value out of it. The Minister is correct that it is taxpayers' money but the amount of that going on HAP and supplements will have to increase. Due to the measure the Government is bringing in, it will be chasing that. That is what happened with every other change it made, which made this worse. It had the same impact. The amount of HAP and that transfer of wealth from the public purse to these big landlords increased.

We have to give people the space to be able to move towards buying. As was mentioned, there is a huge amount of money on deposit in this country. We have a very high level of personal debt but we also have a huge amount of money on deposit. I remember that in 2013 or 2014, the credit unions stated they had around €10 billion or €11 billion. I am open to correction but the figure was something like that. We are willing to use some of this to be invested in a type of housing bond where there would be a modest return on it for the people who invest in the credit union. The banks have that. There is a huge amount of money on deposit, which could be used, and used well, in investment bonds and housing bonds to build the type of cost-rental and affordable housing we need. I do not know why the Government has not considered that. I can only draw the conclusion that it is listening too much to the wrong people.

I learned something very quickly nearly three decades ago as a councillor. If we listened to everybody who came in the door to lobby for this, that and the other, and did it and went along with it, we would have made a right mess of things. When we listened to them too much, we did make a mess of things. You have to learn from your mistakes. Sometimes, you have to do the right thing and do what is right by people. Money is there on deposit. We need to set up housing bonds and have them in place. We need to use that money and taxpayers' money well. The Government is using it to increase skyrocketing rents, which will happen. Everything that is there, all the evidence and all the projections tell us that. To chase and have that transfer of wealth to pay rent supplements to big landlords will make matters a hundred times worse. That is what is going to happen.

As I said, three of us who are voting on this tonight, hopefully, are from Laois; a Fine Gael TD, a Fianna Fáil TD and myself. As the Government is framing the Bill without the amendments, I have to vote against it. This is not because I want to be obstructionist or do down any good suggestion. Tenancy certainty would be a good thing, as would fixity of tenure. Michael Davitt talked about it 150 years ago, when some of our great-grandparents might have been around, yet here we are now. The problem is what the Government is cloaking the six-year thing in is a Trojan horse for the other measures that will nullify and kill that for the reasons outlined because people will not be able to afford those rents.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Rather than answer the question of when rents will go up, how much they will go up by, when they are going to fall and giving any sort of sense of what will happen, the Minister just comes back with "supply, supply, supply". Supply is the answer to the housing crisis, but it is not the only answer. Housing systems across the world also have things such as

rent controls, protection from evictions and measures for security of tenure, which the Minister himself claims this Bill is about. It is not all just about supply, supply, supply. Even if we take it that it is all about supply, it is about the type of supply. What type of supply are we building? The type of supply the Government is incentivising is one that is really expensive and unaffordable to the overwhelming majority of people. It is the supply of housing that I have problems with and, to be very straight, the institutional investors who are here. These funds and this model of housing are hugely problematic.

Unlike the Minister, I have researched and worked in housing for over two decades. Academics, researchers and campaigners have analysed what the financialisation of housing is. Does the Minister know what the financialisation of housing is? It is a process whereby housing has been turned into an investment commodity and an asset. International real estate funds and wealth funds have been driving that agenda for over two decades. The Minister puts the real estate investment trusts across as if they are some sort of people who are here to help us out, but the Government is giving them our rents and tax breaks worth hundreds of millions. They are not here to help us out. They are here to maximise the rent and profits they can get. They are not here to provide affordable housing. They are here to lock as many people as possible into as high a rent as possible for as long as possible. That is their model. The Minister knows, because he is talking to them, that their financial model is based on an ongoing increasing rate of return. How do they get that? From ongoing, increasing rents. That is their model.

We are building in a fundamentally problematic form of housing that is based on ever-increasing rents. These are the rents of institutional investment funds and corporate landlords, such as Kennedy Wilson, IRES REIT and Greystar. The Minister says there is no issue with this, but one in five of all rental properties in Dublin is now owned by institutional landlords and it is heading towards one in four. He claims that our policies will lead to housing misery in perpetuity, but the Government is embedding a permanent form of unaffordable housing supply that is not about delivering housing or homes but is about delivering investment commodities.

I will come back to the Minister on the petty taunts that he threw claiming that I was only doing this for social media clips. He used terms such as "word spaghetti" and said that we are peddling in misery. What I am doing is not peddling in misery. It is highlighting the human cost of what the Government's policies are. I am talking about how its rent hikes will devastate people, cause rising homelessness and how it is inflicting massive misery. The misery here is what the Government is doing is normalising the misery of the highest number of evictions since the Famine. If the Minister throws petty taunts around, I will come back to say to him that what we are doing is, number one, highlighting the human cost, which he is unwilling to accept, and the solutions he is unwilling to accept. He said we have no solutions but we have put them out there. They are a rent freeze, a ban on no-fault evictions, a public construction company and investment from the €166 billion that is in private money. Solutions are there.

It is really pathetic of the Minister to try to claim that we are somehow doing this for social media. For the last ten years, I have been highlighting the scandal of homelessness in this country. Ten years ago, I walked as part of a small march that was one of the first groups of families who are homeless. A child was walking that in her school uniform, with a little sticker on her back stating, "Help me. I am homeless".

I am unlike the Minister.

He has supported Governments for the past decade and stood over year after year of rising homelessness and not once did he speak out and say this is a scandal and that we should not accept one child being homeless. He voted, in the confidence and supply agreement, with Fine Gael and, since 2020, he has been in the Government and not once did he stand up and say what we are doing is wrong and that we should not accept one child as homeless. What did he do? He voted for the lifting of the eviction bans, which led to more people going into homelessness. One of the other decisions, which I described at the time as one of the cruellest decisions any Irish Government has ever made, was making a policy and lifting a ban on evictions when it knew it would lead to rising homelessness. What has it resulted in? Thousands of children being made homeless.

For the Minister to claim I am doing this for social media clips is a disgraceful comment to make. It is absolutely disgraceful. I come here every day to represent the families and children across the country and in my constituency who suffer and whose lives are being damaged by the Government's policy failures. That is the truth. That is the reality the Minister does not want to face. The Minister's rental Bill will lead to more human misery and he is prepared to accept that as a price because he thinks it will lead to some supply with an increase of large institutional investor-funded apartments and he accepts the people who will not be able to afford the rents and will be made homeless as the collateral damage. It is a disgrace and I will keep calling it out in the passionate way I do and in a way that highlights that this is a social catastrophe that is causing massive human misery. I will not let one day go by when I will not call that out.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I thank all the Deputies who submitted amendments to this Bill. I have to agree it is a terrible Bill.

The Minister said he is solving the housing crisis. I do not think anyone buys that. I do not think anyone out there buys that. I do not think the electorate buys that at all. The Minister and the Government are failing, like every Government before it.

I find it scurrilous that he would accuse Opposition TDs, when they are giving scrutiny to a Bill he has introduced, by saying it is spaghetti words or that they are looking for social media clips. That is disgraceful and the Minister should withdraw that comment.

I rise today to speak for renters, who, although they make up 30% of the population, are seldom heard in this House or in our public conversation. I am a renter. I have rented my entire adult life. I want to be clear that I have only ever had good landlords, people who were kind, efficient, kept good homes and were fair. However, my story is not representative. There are too many stories to count in my constituency and among my generation of unscrupulous actors in the rental sector who have exploited those without homes for their own greed.

I will quote some of those who are renting in my constituency. On the question of security for tenants, one constituent said to me:

There is very little security for renters and the laws meant to protect tenants do not seem to be enforced in reality, [which is a real question for this Bill]. There is no long-term certainty for tenants even though generations of families rent long term. If tenants can simply be asked to leave after five or six years, people are left worse off every single time.

Another constituent who works in the public sector is in her middle years and has recently been evicted. She noted the reasons:

The reason behind my eviction is obvious. Our current rent is too low, €1,100. I think what makes the whole scenario even more ironic is that the result of my work in the public sector is in fact extremely beneficial for the Government and the country. While I am finding companies that are non-compliant regarding their tax matters and getting them to pay what they must to the Exchequer, I am being let down by the State and I do not think there is any exaggeration in saying that.

A third constituent said the following about being evicted from a tenancy only to find the place relet at nearly three times the rent.

I lived in an apartment in Sandymount for six years. I moved in in August 2019. Last January, we received notice that the owner was selling the building and we would be issued with termination letters, which arrived a few months later. These also stated the building was being sold and that the tenancy termination date was 10 December 2025. Yesterday, my former housemates and I received notice that our old apartment was being rented again and the rent was going from €1,480 to €4,400 per month.

I have also received a considerable number of emails from constituent tenants concerned about the cost of renting in Dublin and in my constituency. One simply said there is nowhere to live, no matter how much you earn. Another, not far from here, described the townhouse he lives in as having "five rooms, nine so-called licensees living in it, including me and my roommate who are sharing a twin bedroom paying more than €650 per person per month with no bills included". Most critically, a refrain I hear from constituents - and this is important because these are people who would consider voting for Fianna Fáil, but will not - including homeowners, tenants and even some small landlords, is that they ask the Government to please stop letting vulture funds and investment companies buy houses and apartments. I listened yesterday in this Chamber as the Tánaiste and leader of Fine Gael defended that practice still occurring despite the overwhelming public opposition.

The Bill was only introduced to the House last week and is being rushed through this week at the last minute and I kind of wonder why. About 18 years ago, I was in college. I was renting a room for approximately €100 per week, which at the time was expensive. It was a nice place and I had a very nice landlord. It was September 2008. I distinctly remember hearing about another rush by the Government of the day to pass laws that would change the face of this country. I am, of course, talking about the bank guarantee, which plunged the country's finances into total ruin in an effort to appease international markets and international investors and bondholders.

Here I stand now, many years later, a Member of this House, and I cannot help but think back to that act of the Government, an act of Fianna Fáil like this one, and notice the similarities. History, unfortunately, seems to be repeating itself. Instead of assuaging the thirst of international financial capital by putting the Government's fiscal position on the line, Fianna Fáil is now proposing to offer them the entire renting population of Ireland, including every young person starting out, every divorcee who had to move out, every foreign multinational worker who came here for a good job and finds a disproportionate amount of their income going to landlords, and every older person who for one reason or another does not own their

home. The rush of this legislation, with the guillotine in mere hours from now, reminds me of that bank guarantee.

Why is it that the great urgency of Fianna Fáil is always to pass legislation, enact law or make guarantees for international capital, but not for others? Where is the urgency for the emergency winter payment for people with disabilities? Where is the urgency to build offshore wind farms to bring down electricity prices? Where is the urgency for the needs of people and their children who are in poverty, while that poverty increases? Where is the urgency to actually build the homes? Why is that urgency only ever applied for international capital?

There was a great opportunity in the renewed vigour of the Government to pass legislation this year, after one of the worst ever years for the passing of legislation. I welcome it, but it is not this. It is not a Bill to accelerate some of the highest rents in Europe in one of the countries with the highest concentration of institutional international capital landlords anywhere in the world. We saw what happened to the country the last time Fianna Fáil gave rushed gifts to foreign financial investors. In case the Minister has forgotten, it did not end well, for the country or his party. I fear the same will happen again as a result of this Bill and the Government will have sacrificed another generation on its altar of greed.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I will briefly respond to some of what the Minister said, though first I will note that we can see the impact of the guillotine. We are still on the first amendment and we are going to run out of debating time relatively soon. When the Minister made the point that the Government is not ramming it through, his excuse for how it is not ramming it through is because it announced the legislation last year, in August, but that is precisely the point. He announced the policy proposal last year, which is fine, and absolutely his right, but we are debating it, having voted on Second Stage just a few hours ago, and will do Committee and Remaining Stages in five hours. It will be guillotined three weeks out from this being implemented. That is ramming it through. There would be no ramming it through if the Minister had brought in the legislation in September or October, if we had debated it and so on. The Minister is absolutely ramming it through. That the Minister announced it a long time ago and did not bring forward the legislation so it could be scrutinised and amended precisely proves the point about him ramming it through rather than disproving it.

It is interesting that the Minister admits that we currently have a situation of misery. He admits that but says that his Bill is a way to avoid making that misery permanent. I will take the first part of that first of all. We currently have a situation of misery for renters, for people who are trying to buy their homes, for homeless people, and for half a million young people trapped at home. A system of misery has been widely created in the housing system, affecting many people. How did we get here? Shall we have a look at how we got here? If the Government accepts that we have a situation of misery and the Opposition says we have a situation of misery, how did we get here? We got here with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, but the key point in a way is not that those parties that are responsible for it, but that the policies pursued by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael got us to this point. I have been listening to the debate and the policies that were pursued have been set out in great detail. They involved a move away from the delivery of social housing at any scale. There has been an increase in recent years but there has almost been a complete collapse. The policy has been that the market will provide. It has involved incentivising landlords and developers to come into the market and

making sure they can make as much profit as they need to make. That is the essence of the approach of the Government and what has got us to the point of housing misery.

I always make the point that I remember in the 2016 general election campaign that homelessness and the housing crisis were emerging as a significant issue. By that stage, we had fewer than 5,000 people homeless. Later on, it was said that when we reached 10,000, that would be a breaking point and that people would not stand going over 10,000. In the 2020 general election, we were over 10,000. By the 2024 general election, we were well over 15,000, and now we are on a trajectory to 20,000, which will be met rapidly if the Government gets its way and manages to implement this approach. That is the consequence of those housing policies. One follows the other. Some people have got very rich in the meantime from that. It is a massive transfer of wealth from the many to the few. What is different about this Government, this housing policy and what is in the Bill? This is just supercharging the policies we have had up until now. It is going in the same direction that has got us to this point but just going faster.

It is all this trickle-down idea that if we invite in these people and make it clear to them that they can make loads of money, and that if we give a windfall of €20 million to IRES REIT, it will invest more money because it thinks it will be able to make more profits, and then, in the long run, rents will come down. That is effectively what the Government says its position is: that there will be pain in the short term and rents will rise for people, but the investment will come in and in the long run we will have a better housing market. It is effectively what the Government has been doing for the last ten years, though not at the scale or speed of increases that the Government is now introducing. The result is the misery that the Minister admits has been created.

The Minister's point about social media clips was ironic. The Government says things all the time for social media clips and it is pushed out, just to say it so many times that people think there must be something to it. The Minister said that the Opposition has not put forward any proposals or alternatives. I do not know how he can say it. He has been listening to us. He might not agree with what is being put forward but it is clear that the amendments, like our amendments, contain alternative proposals. He might not think the proposals will work but they are clearly alternatives. Alternative positions have been raised repeatedly in the course of the debate, calling for a ban on economic evictions, which we know works. We know it does not stop homelessness or people entering homelessness, but we know that it significantly slows it down. We know that because we have done it, and when we get rid of it, the speed of people entering homelessness goes up faster. We have said we want real rent controls which reduce rents to affordable levels and we have pointed to the need for State investment and a State construction company to build social and affordable homes.

It is just not very serious for the Minister to say he has not heard any alternative proposals when we are literally debating amendments which have alternative proposals. The Government's approach on this issue is horrendously cynical. One part of it is to try to normalise the housing crisis and make it like the health crisis, which every opinion poll turns up as a significant issue. When asked what a big issue is for them, people say the health crisis. The Government has normalised the idea that it is such a big crisis and it is a black hole which money can be thrown at, but it can never really be resolved, to try to neuter it as a political issue. Successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have done that reasonably

effectively on the issue of the health crisis. Effectively the Government's approach to the housing crisis is to do the same. It is to get people to accept as normal that we will hit 20,000 people in emergency accommodation and that we will go beyond that, and to accept that rents will increase even faster, to €3,000 or more, as a consequence of this Bill - that is just the way it is.

Some elements of the Government, backed up by some toxic parts of politics, are playing a dirty game of blaming not those at the top but the most vulnerable people in our society, suggesting that asylum seekers are adding to people in emergency accommodation or whatever. Not only is this stuff factually inaccurate, but it is a dirty trick designed to distract attention away from Fianna Fáil, from Fine Gael and from those who benefit from the housing crisis. The other part of the Government strategy is to suggest that there is no alternative and that nobody has any policies. We can do whatever we want about policies, such as writing books, but we will still hear the Government say that these people have no ideas. The Government says it day in, day out on social media clips just to create the idea that there is no alternative. "There is no alternative" is the mantra that is pushed on people. It is incumbent on us to get the message across that there is an alternative and it starts from the opposite point of view. The Government starts from the point of view of what will make landlords and developers happy. When it is speaking to the public, it adds onto that the idea that it will close the viability gap, which is this new term that has entered politics just in the last year or so and has become the thing to dress up how the Government wants to make developers and institutional investors have even more profits than they currently have.

Our starting point is instead what will resolve the housing crisis. What will mean the basic thing of people being able to access affordable, quality, decent housing? It should not be too much to ask in one of the richest countries in the world in 2026, but if one starts from that standpoint, one comes up with a Bill that points in the opposite direction to what the Government is doing in the main with this Bill and comes up with things like the amendments that we are debating today.

**Deputy James Browne:** I thank the Deputies. We have been here for nearly three and a half hours debating the first amendment, but that is because there has hardly been a single discussion from the Opposition on the amendment. It has been referred to but most of the debate has not been on the amendment itself. Let us be honest: if the debate was simply on the amendment, we would have moved on a long time ago.

I want to address a number of issues. Deputy Ó Broin is using the RTB data for scaremongering.

Those were his projections from that data. I completely reject his conclusion. I do not know what his conclusions or projections are based on but they are certainly based on no change. We are going to drive supply. Everything I have done since becoming Minister for housing has been to address the housing crisis in this country, and I have always acknowledged there is a housing crisis in this country. Everything I have done is to try to address the housing crisis to get people into the homes they need, whether they are social, affordable or private, for rent or ownership, or for people in towns, villages, rural Ireland or inner cities. We have to solve that housing crisis, which is what everything I am doing is doing. How do we do that? One key to it is actually driving supply - yes, the right supply - but we have to drive the supply of homes.

Another rent freeze and eviction ban are not going to drive any supply whatsoever. What they do is crystallise the lack of hope for everybody trying to get somewhere to live because they are never going to get a home to live in. We have to drive supply.

The situation at the moment is very temporary. We are now moving to permanent rent regulation in this country. We are giving certainty to tenants, landlords, investors and the State by bringing in a resolution to the rental situation in this country into the future. That is really important.

The security of tenure element has been ignored. These reforms will ensure that, for the first time, tenants will have security of tenure. They will have a minimum of six years. With a large landlord, they will have a tenancy for as long as they need it, which is crucial. That is not the case right now. They can be confident about not receiving that notice of termination. It allows people to put down roots and have that sense of security. The number one driver of homelessness is a notice to quit. Deputy Ó Broin is right, in that there is a churn of about every three and a half years, but this security of tenure will change that. The Deputy's pronouncements are made on a no-change basis but this will lengthen tenancies by giving that security of tenure to people. The major obstacle to security of tenure under existing regimes is that people can issue no-fault evictions. That will now come to an end for the majority of tenants and, for a minority of tenants, we are substantially restricting those opportunities and giving people at least six years. That is what is in here for tenants. Opposition Deputies have all referred to landlords. Most of the criticism of this Bill has come from landlords across right across the board.

**A Deputy:** That is because the Government has not given them as much as they would like.

**Deputy James Browne:** The Housing Commission recognised we could not continue with what we were doing. The Housing Agency investigated and recognised that we had some of the most restrictive rent controls in the world, which was killing supply of the homes that we need right across the country. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, said we had to move. We have to give people hope and we have to drive housing supply across the country. The Land Development Agency, LDA, has built 2,300 social, affordable and cost rental homes-----

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy James Browne:** -----with 1,900 this year and a pipeline of 12,000. It is driving the supply and the building of homes.

Does Deputy Hearne want to know why I accuse the Social Democrats in particular with regard to social media clips? He stood up and started using hyperbole about the Famine. Deputy Hayes, sitting beside him, stood up and started talking about the altar of greed. What did he do the minute he sat down? He looked over at Deputy Hearne, gave him a wink and Deputy Hearne gave a big smile. That is why I accuse the Social Democrats with regard to social media. It is performative effort in here every single day. At least there is an attempt at policy on the other side.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy James Browne:** This is about addressing the housing crisis in this country. We are bringing forward and implementing solutions. We are giving tenants security and we are giving certainty to tenants, landlords and investors so that we can drive supply. This is about giving hope and delivering homes for people. I want people in their homes right across this country, and that is what we are doing.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** With regard to my amendment in particular and my request for an impact forecast on amendment No. 8, if the Minister is so certain that this is a permanent solution, which I do not believe it is, where is the modelling to forecast what it is going to do to rents in the private rental market over the next number of years?

**Deputy James Browne:** We have had Housing Agency assessments.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Into RPZs.

**Deputy James Browne:** We have to drive the delivery and supply of homes. We know that if we do not do this, we will not get the supply that we need. We have had endless modelling over the years. It is always based on a no-change basis. This is going to bring the change that we need to deliver the supply of homes.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Most of the points have been made about these amendments. I want the Minister to try to explain at what point he seriously believes the supply he is talking about is going to lead to a reduction in rents. Will he give us some indication? I think it is total fantasy. In the explanatory memorandum to the Bill and in his speech introducing the Bill, the Minister said that rents for long-standing tenancies should not fall behind the market. That is what the investors want. They are saying that if they have to deal with rents that are lower than the market, they are not going to build because the Government's rent controls are too restrictive as far as they are concerned and limit their ability to charge €2,500 or €3,000 per month. Therefore, they want the Government to get rid of them in order to incentivise them to come in and build.

Is the Minister honestly saying to me that he thinks that if he does this, rents will fall at some point? I am interested to hear when he thinks that point is going to arrive because it has never happened before except during the crash and even then it did not happen for very long. Rents went down after the crash but only briefly. Can he tell me when he thinks rents are going to come down? Probably if he even thinks about that question, the likelihood that rents are ever going to come down is a total mirage and fantasy. Does he honestly believe that an average rent of, say, €30,000 per year or €2,500 per month, which is about €30,000 of after-tax income, is a reasonable level of rent to have in the capital city? How does he think people are supposed to pay that? I know very few people who think that is a sustainable rent.

We have had a long debate on this amendment, so the last point I will make concerns why the Government keeps recycling the mythology that there has been a big exodus of landlords. There has not been a big exodus of landlords. There has been an increase in landlords. In 2023, there were 101,000 landlords in the country. I am sorry, that is not right. I do not have the right figures in front of me. In any event, the number of landlords has increased since 2023 and the number of tenancies has increased, so the private rental sector has increased and the

number of landlords has increased over the past two years. If the Minister's argument is that unless we do this, there will be a continued exodus, I suggest that there is a problem with his logic. Some might be leaving but there is a net increase in the number of people. The reason for this is because huge profits are being made by people who are landlords.

*9 o'clock*

How could huge profits not be made when they are charging the sort of extortionate rents that currently exist out in the market?

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** As soon as I read the Bill, I knew straight away, going by the data, that students would be badly affected by this. The Bill will have profound and deeply damaging consequences for students and we must call this for what it is: another failure of this Government's broken housing policy. Students are at the very heart of this housing crisis. Young people trying to make their lives better are having their dreams of education dashed because they either cannot find accommodation or simply cannot afford it. Some students are left with long commutes, couch surfing or sleeping in their cars and that is absolutely shameful. Our students are not met with opportunity but with sky-high rents and a market rigged in favour of big landlords and big investors.

While we know that purpose-built student accommodation will be reset every three years, we also know that because of the Government's failures to meet its student accommodation targets, most students are going to have to go into the private rental market. They will have no protections and may see year-on-year rent hikes and unsecured tenancies in digs. Where is the protection for those students? Students deserve certainty, they deserve fairness and they deserve a government that stands on their sides, not one that continues to protect the profits of landlords over the future of our young people. This Bill must be amended, and students and other people put first. Otherwise, it will simply be another chapter in this Government's housing failure.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The reason this is more like a Second Stage debate is because the Government forced us to have the Committee and Remaining Stages on the floor on the Dáil instead of us having Committee Stage as normal in a committee room where we would have had a completely different type of engagement as we always do. That was an imposition by the Government. We all wanted and argued at the Business Committee that the Committee Stage should be taken in the normal manner. For the Minister, after the Government deliberately decided that this would be the format for Committee Stage, then to criticise that format is not very credible.

I am going to respond specifically to the Minister's issues because, in fact, almost everything I have said during the debate is about the amendments. He accused me of using RTB data to scaremonger. In fact, my assessment of the RTB data is a very modest one. It asks a very simple question. The Government is introducing a change of policy. That change of policy will allow a landlord to reset the rent to market rent between tenancies. It is eminently reasonable to ask: how much will that reset be? The data that allow us to answer that question is from the RTB, which tells us what the current rent is and what the new market rent is in a certain location for a certain type of property. They are the facts. For the Minister to describe

the facts as scaremongering when at no stage in the past six months has he put any alternative assessment into place just shows that we are correct.

He also said that the assessment that the RTB's trends on registrations continue into the future is based on a no-change basis. That is not strictly correct. I said that if these trends continue, what is it that leads to new tenancies being created? It is not rent pressure zones, that is for sure. It is that some people in the private rental sector move out because they get social housing; it is nowhere near enough, but some. Some people move out of the private rental sector because they manage to buy a house. Other people move out of the private rental sector because they cannot afford the rent and, because of the Government's policies, they are forced to move back in with family and friends. Some people also emigrate. That frees up rental stock that other people then rent and that is going to continue.

Is the Minister asking me: do I think the trends are going to continue exactly as they are? No, I do not, but all of those elements are going to create a situation where new rental stock will become available that will be covered by the market reset rule and tenants will be affected in their tens of thousands.

I spoke with a large institutional landlord last year. This is a landlord that does not evict on sale. This is a landlord that does not evict on family member grounds. This is a landlord that will only move to evict if the tenant breaches contract. It is one of the largest institutional landlords in the State. What does the Minister think its rental turnover is every year? What does he think its rental turnover is in terms of the churn within their tenancies? Has he ever stopped to ask any of the large institutional investors that effectively currently operate a policy of no-fault evictions what their churn is? In the case of this significant player in the market, its turnover is about 25% of tenancies annually. It is remarkably similar to the RTB's data. This is a landlord currently operating a no-fault eviction policy and it still has a 25% turnover every year. That is one of the reasons what company through its lobbyist, Irish Institutional Property, lobbied for this. They know that once this is through, all of their rents will reset to market rent every four years. I suspect that the Minister knows that. I suspect from the conversations he has had that he is fully aware of it.

The information that we put into the public domain this week and put on the Dáil record in more detail about new tenancy registration trends and the cost of the market reset is factual. Of course, whether those things transpire for every individual renter in the time ahead is a separate question but we will have plenty of data to deal with that.

The Minister said that we are moving from a temporary situation to a permanent one. That temporary situation lasted a decade, and it is because the Government made such a mess of the rent pressure zone legislation. Just as RPZs were permanent for a decade, there is going to be further changes to this legislation because of the mess the Government is making of it.

With respect to security of tenure, under section 8, there are still significant grounds for eviction for new tenants of small landlords. Are they the same as under section 34 of the current Residential Tenancies Act? They are not. They are slightly more restricted, but the landlord will still be able to evict where the dwelling is needed by him or her or a more narrowly defined family member group than before to avoid undue hardship, but also in cases where the landlord has a debt discharge.

There is an interesting question that I want the Minister to answer. What is the status of an eviction at the end of an existing Part 4 tenancy for a tenant who has an existing Part 4 tenancy prior to June or July 2022? As he knows, those tenancies will come to the end of their first cycle in 2027 or 2028 when the landlord can issue a notice of termination on no grounds and strictly speaking under law that would not be seen as a no-fault eviction. Are those tenants protected under the Government's new rules? In terms of the landlord resetting the rent for the next tenant to market rent at the beginning, will the landlord be able to avail of that?

The interesting thing about the eviction levels at the end of existing Part 4 tenancies is that when the no grounds rule was available, it was hardly ever used. Will we see a glut of landlords availing of that come 2028? Again, the legislation does not speak to it, but I am interested in the Minister's view.

It also ignores the fact that someone can be evicted if they cannot afford the rent because of the rate at which it is rising and fall into arrears. That is an experience that far too many families who ended up in homelessness lived with in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

No-fault evictions are not being ended for all new tenancies. The Minister is correct that they are for the tenants of larger landlords, although for many of those tenants that is currently the default position anyway, but for tenants in new tenancies of small landlords, which is currently about 44% of the market, there will still be grounds for no-fault evictions, albeit they will be slightly more restricted than before.

I am not going to continue this discussion, but I would be interested to hear the Minister's view on whether a landlord who avails of that termination at the end of an existing Part 4 tenancy, pre-2022 will be able to avail of the market reset at the start of a new tenancy on foot of that eviction.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** The Minister has still not answered a fundamental question that we asked. Based on the introduction of the Bill, when will rents stabilise? When will rents start reducing as a result of the Bill?

The Minister has not answered the question and it runs against all policy, which is supposed to be evidence-based policy, that he understands the consequences and impacts of a Bill but has not set out the core purpose, which is going to have significant social impact by resulting in rising rents. He accepts this but he will not set out when rents will fall as a result of this.

Again, the Minister has not set out or accepted how renters who are forced to or have to leave tenancies are going to pay higher market rents. How are they going to afford it? Where is the income going to come from? In the Minister's view, what is a sustainable or average rent? In the Minister's view, what should we be aiming for in terms of average rents? Maybe he could set that out. What does he think is a sustainable and appropriate national average rent?

The Minister needs to accept and make clear a point. While he stated that for the first time, he is introducing no-fault evictions, protection and security of tenure for renters, he is not introducing it for all existing renters. Can he at least have the honesty to state that he is introducing a form of security of tenure for new tenancies but that all existing tenants are still covered under the same situation whereby they can be evicted on a no-fault basis? That is a fundamental mistake with this Bill. Why will the Minister not accept our proposed amendment

to extend no-fault evictions to all existing tenancies? In regard to the proposals and amendments we are putting forward, that is one of the core ones.

**Deputy James Browne:** I will address a couple of the issues that have been raised. If a tenant involuntarily leaves, the rent cannot be reset under these rules. That is very important. You will always have tenants who will voluntarily leave. The number of HAPs in this country has reduced by about 9,000, give or take. That is as a result of the significant increase in social and affordable housing we have been delivering. People will always leave tenancies voluntarily. If they do that, a rent can be reset if the landlord was going back out to the market but if a tenant is in any shape or form involuntarily put out of the property, there cannot be a reset.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Except for breach of contract.

**Deputy James Browne:** That is an additional protection.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Except for breach of contract.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is just a clarification, I am not heckling. Except for breach of contract.

**Deputy James Browne:** We have to drive up-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Surely breach of contract is also-----

**Deputy James Browne:** If the tenant breaches a contract, yes.

In relation to the 240,000 tenancies and there being no change, I have said that multiple times, just as I have said multiple times that one child homeless is one child too many. Everything I am doing is about driving up the delivery of homes. The entire rental and housing market is always going to be dynamic, so I am not going to indulge the fantasy, as the Deputy refers to, of giving a date and a time for when rents are going to change.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Roughly.

**Deputy James Browne:** We know if we do not bring in changes, rents are only going in one direction and that is up. As important is the fact that if we do not bring in change, we are not going to get the supply for those people who are living at home and need somewhere to rent, or as the population increases. Our population has increased by about 810,000 people since 2014. That requires an average of about 250,000 new homes, which is about what has been delivered. We need to deliver more to solve the housing, rental and homelessness crises and that is at least what we are doing, so people have somewhere to be safe and secure in their own homes.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Do any further Deputies wish to contribute? No.

Amendment put:

| The Committee divided: Tá, 69; Níl, 81; 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.              |       |
| Clarke, Sorca.                                    | Burke, Colm.                |       |
| Collins, Michael.                                 | Burke, Peter.               |       |
| Conway-Walsh, Rose.                               | Butler, Mary.               |       |
| Coppinger, Ruth.                                  | Butterly, Paula.            |       |
| Cronin, Réada.                                    | Buttimer, Jerry.            |       |
| Crowe, Seán.                                      | Byrne, Malcolm.             |       |
| Cullinane, David.                                 | Cahill, Michael.            |       |
| Cummins, Jen.                                     | Callaghan, Catherine.       |       |
| Daly, Pa.                                         | Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer. |       |
| Devine, Máire.                                    | Chambers, Jack.             |       |
| Doherty, Pearse.                                  | Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.       |       |
| Donnelly, Paul.                                   | Clendennen, John.           |       |
| Ellis, Dessie.                                    | Collins, Niall.             |       |
| Fitzmaurice, Michael.                             | Connolly, John.             |       |
| Gannon, Gary.                                     | Cooney, Joe.                |       |
| Gibney, Sinéad.                                   | Cummins, John.              |       |
| Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.                           | Currie, Emer.               |       |
| Gould, Thomas.                                    | Daly, Martin.               |       |
| Graves, Ann.                                      | Dempsey, Aisling.           |       |
| Guirke, Johnny.                                   | Dillon, Alan.               |       |
| Hayes, Eoin.                                      | Dolan, Albert.              |       |
| Healy, Seamus.                                    | Feighan, Frankie.           |       |
| Hearne, Rory.                                     | Fleming, Sean.              |       |
| Kelly, Alan.                                      | Foley, Norma.               |       |
| Kenny, Eoghan.                                    | Gallagher, Pat the Cope.    |       |
| Kenny, Martin.                                    | Geoghegan, James.           |       |
| Kerrane, Claire.                                  | Grealish, Noel.             |       |
| Lawless, Paul.                                    | Harkin, Marian.             |       |
| Lawlor, George.                                   | Harris, Simon.              |       |
| Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.                           | Healy-Rae, Danny.           |       |
| McDonald, Mary Lou.                               | Healy-Rae, Michael.         |       |
| McGettigan, Donna.                                | Heneghan, Barry.            |       |
| McGuinness, Conor D.                              | Heydon, Martin.             |       |
| Mitchell, Denise.                                 | Higgins, Emer.              |       |

|                           |                             |  |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Murphy, Paul.             | Keogh, Keira.               |  |
| Mythen, Johnny.           | Lahart, John.               |  |
| Nash, Ged.                | Lawless, James.             |  |
| Newsome Drennan, Natasha. | Lowry, Michael.             |  |
| Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  | Maxwell, David.             |  |
| Nolan, Carol.             | McAuliffe, Paul.            |  |
| O'Callaghan, Cian.        | McCarthy, Noel.             |  |
| O'Donoghue, Richard.      | McConalogue, Charlie.       |  |
| O'Donoghue, Robert.       | McCormack, Tony.            |  |
| O'Gorman, Roderic.        | McGrath, Séamus.            |  |
| O'Hara, Louis.            | McGreehan, Erin.            |  |
| O'Reilly, Louise.         | Moran, Kevin Boxer.         |  |
| O'Rourke, Darren.         | Moynihan, Aindrias.         |  |
| Ó Broin, Eoin.            | Moynihan, Michael.          |  |
| Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         | Moynihan, Shane.            |  |
| Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       | Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. |  |
| Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. | Murphy, Michael.            |  |
| Quaide, Liam.             | Naughton, Hildegard.        |  |
| Quinlivan, Maurice.       | Neville, Joe.               |  |
| Rice, Pádraig.            | O'Callaghan, Jim.           |  |
| Sheehan, Conor.           | O'Connell, Maeve.           |  |
| Smith, Duncan.            | O'Connor, James.            |  |
| Stanley, Brian.           | O'Dea, Willie.              |  |
| Tóibín, Peadar.           | O'Donnell, Kieran.          |  |
| Wall, Mark.               | O'Donovan, Patrick.         |  |
| Ward, Charles.            | O'Meara, Ryan.              |  |
| Ward, Mark.               | 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.            |  |
|                           | Troy, Robert.               |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 3 to 6, inclusive, are out of order.

Amendments Nos. 3 to 6, inclusive, not moved.

Question, “That section 1 stand part of the Bill”, put and declared carried.

Question, “That section 2 stand part of the Bill”, put and declared carried.

## NEW SECTIONS

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I move amendment No. 7:

In page 6, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

### **“Review of Act**

3. The Minister shall, not later than 2 years after the passing of this Act, conduct a review of the operation and effectiveness of amendments effected by this Act and shall, not later than 3 months after the end of that period of 2 years, or on the completion of the review, whichever is the earlier, make a report, in writing, to each House of the Oireachtas of the findings of the review and of the conclusions drawn from those findings.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I move amendment No. 8:

In page 6, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

### **“Impact forecast**

3. The Minister shall, as soon as may be after the passing of this Act, but not later than 6 months thereafter, prepare and publish, including publication by electronic means, a statement of forecasts for the following period of 10 years following its publication in respect of the impact of the amendments effected by this Act on market rents for a representative sample of tenancies, together with such other information as the Minister may deem appropriate for the purposes of this section.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 9, 31 and 38 are related and may be discussed together, by agreement. Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I move amendment No. 9:

In page 6, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

### **“Notices of termination: temporary ban**

3. Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act or any other enactment or rule of law, the period of 3 years commencing on the passing of this Act is deemed to be an emergency period within the meaning and for the purposes of section 5 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 and that section, with the exception of subsection (6)(b), applies accordingly.”.

This amendment introduces a new section to the Bill concerning a temporary ban on notices of termination. The section would, in effect, reintroduce the emergency period, which we

remember from Covid-19. The emergency period was provided for by the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. During that period, there was a statutory pause on all termination notices. We are in an emergency period now, as has been discussed at length. The Dáil has long since declared and recognised the housing crisis to be a national emergency. Under this section, there would be a similar ban, this time for three years from the passing of the Bill, on all termination notices and evictions.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I support the amendments, particularly the introduction of a no-fault eviction ban for all tenancies, and that no eviction could take place where there is an identified risk of homelessness to the tenant. This exists in countries like Belgium, for example, where people cannot be evicted when they have nowhere else to go. It is still shocking to me that we have the highest level of eviction since the Famine, yet the Government acts as if it is normal and acceptable. It is absolutely unacceptable to us that we are heading towards what is likely to be at least 20,000 households being served notices of eviction this year, if it remains in line with last year.

Such people are coming to my constituency clinic, and every TD has been contacted by people who are in desperate situations. Someone contacted me just today to set out their case. They are a cancer patient and their husband is ill. They talk about being stuck in a renting cycle for 25 years. They also put off having children until they would be in secure housing, but now, of course, they are at the point where it does not look like it is going to happen for them. They describe it as follows:

Yet again, we are being faced with eviction for no reason except the landlord is deciding to sell up. We are so tired of having to jump at somebody's whim.

Being ill, they are exhausted. They describe the emotional and mental impact of this. They continue:

We just want somewhere we can call our own, where we can be safe from homelessness, and not fear every knock at the door, letter or phone call. We have never been late with a rent payment or been in arrears. We have always kept up a good relationship with landlords.

There are thousands of tenants like this up and down this country. The Bill, as currently put forward, without this amendment, does nothing for the existing hundreds of thousands of renters, who will still be exposed to no-fault evictions. The Bill does nothing to address their situation. That is why we feel it is vital that we have a ban on no-fault evictions, in particular where people are at risk of homelessness. It is also an opportunity for the Government if it is concerned about security of tenure, which this Bill is supposed to be about. If it was actually about that, the Government would accept this amendment and apply it to all tenancies.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is worthwhile at times, when we are discussing these things, which can seem quite dry and technical, to just remind ourselves of the human reality. Literally every week, I have somebody coming in to me who is facing a date for eviction. This week, given the particular week that is in it, I had a lovely young couple come in to me. Both of them have been working. They are probably about their mid-20s. They are a lovely couple. Throughout the whole engagement with this couple, they had with them their young son, who has special needs. He is about two or three - a lovely little fellow. He has the same name as

my son, coincidentally. He was sitting there smiling at me the whole time during the meeting. His mother was just bawling crying the whole time. Her partner had to keep reaching over to hold her because, as much as she was trying to keep it together to explain the situation they were in, she just kept getting overwhelmed with fear because their date for eviction is this week.

They have done absolutely nothing wrong, nothing at all. They are terrified about the prospect of what is going to happen to them and their child with special needs. Both of them told me that they themselves, later in life, have been diagnosed with special needs and are on the spectrum. They are finding it really difficult to cope with all the forms they have to fill out, and trying to understand HAP, homeless HAP and the thresholds. If they get the working family payment, what might that mean? Would it drive them over the social housing income threshold and make their situation even worse? They asked if there was anything I could do, and so on. When you look at their position on the list, you would think not, unless these people get prioritised, and to get prioritised is extremely difficult.

The bar is getting higher and higher to get medical priority because a feature of these things is people who often are not doctors second-guessing people who are writing letters on behalf of people, where doctors say this person should be prioritised, that this kid should not go into homelessness because it would be really bad for them, or that this person because of their disability should not be in a hostel. The council, because it has nowhere to put them anyway, says it cannot prioritise them because it is not a severe enough disability. My question to the Minister is whether anything can justify this. Can anything justify the tears of that mother? Can anything justify that little child who is about two or three with special needs being driven into a hostel in town? They are absolutely terrified. I do not think they will go to a hostel in town, to tell the truth. I would say they would probably do almost anything bar go there. It is a long way out from any sort of family support networks they have in Dún Laoghaire, but that is what people get offered most of the time in Dún Laoghaire because we do not even have enough emergency accommodation there. People get sent into town to a hostel. They might be in there, and then after a year or two they might get into emergency accommodation in Dún Laoghaire. Then they do not know how long they might be there. They could be just languishing there for God knows how long.

Can anything justify that being done to those people, in the Minister of State's mind? Can anything justify them being evicted in that circumstance to satisfy the investors, to incentivise? What we are being told is that has to be done, to incentivise the investors. It is a small landlord, by the way, doing that. They were not saying awful things about the small landlord. It is you guys who manage the sector. It is you guys who create and sustain a sector that allows that to happen. To my mind, if the consequence of the sort of rental sector we set up is that this happens to this family and this child, there is something wrong. There is something wrong with that. It is just not right for that to happen to that child or that mother. It is just not right; I do not care what justification the Minister of State wants to try to put on it. We know, as a Deputy said earlier, that it is people with spreadsheets in Antwerp and New York looking at Dublin and saying they cannot put the rent up to €2,500 in certain circumstances so they might not build there, because it is not profitable enough. The human consequence is that lovely couple, the tears and the child going in. To my mind that is State neglect. We passed that referendum on children and passed the Children First guidelines, which say the State is culpable of an abuse if a child is neglected. To my mind, the State is guilty of an abuse of that child and

of the wilful neglect of the well-being of that child if the child is allowed to go into homelessness.

I hear the Government say it is working on prevention of people going into homelessness. No, it is not. It is allowing that to happen. It thinks that in order to incentivise investors, this is legitimate. It is not legitimate. It is illegitimate. It is absolutely outrageous that it can be allowed to happen. Can the Minister of State honestly stand over that situation? That is just this week's example for me in my office. I am sure others can talk about their experiences in the last week or two of the same desperate situations. It really struck me just how confused and desperate and helpless people were, pleading for help, and I am just thinking there is nothing I can do because that is allowed. It is allowed that they can be thrown out and allowed that they have nowhere to be sent but a hostel. Very often in my area people say they would rather sleep in their car or pitch a tent somewhere than go into town into those hostels. That is the human reality of it all.

The Government has a choice not to do that and say it is not acceptable. It is done in other countries. The Government says it is not evicting people into homelessness, that that is not going to happen because it is wrong, and it can do something else to make sure that does not happen. It can provide secure, affordable housing for people like that couple and their child.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I support this amendment. I had a gentleman come to me a few weeks ago. He is a paramedic working in the ambulance service and he was homeless. He went through a relationship break-up. He could find nowhere to rent. He has a good job and is working. The only service he could be offered in Cork was Simon Community Night Light. You go in at 11 o'clock at night and leave at 8 o'clock in the morning. He was going to work at 4 o'clock. He was in the ambulance service. He was not sure what time he would be home at. He could not go to work for a few days because the only place he could lie down was in the Night Light. How is it possible?

I had another guy in a similar situation. Where he was renting, the landlord, a small landlord, was selling the property. He was a security worker. He did door staff and worked in bars, nightclubs and fast food restaurants late at night. The doors close at half past 11, so he is sleeping in his car. Then if you are not engaging with the emergency accommodation, you are not classified as homeless. It is a catch-22. Because you cannot get in somewhere to put down your head, you are not homeless. How is that right? I spoke to a girl a while ago who is in accommodation and she and the other people in there believe the accommodation is not fit for inhabitants. It is homelessness services. She believes HIQA, or someone like HIQA, should be brought in to audit these properties. Where is their dignity? She is there with a young child. She has been in there for over a year. I know people who have done three years, three Christmases in emergency accommodation, people with children - Santa Claus. Some people might not get this but in Cork, and I am sure nationally now, we see a drop in homelessness by a small bit in December. I know some of the people. If they have kids, they try to go home or get into a friend's house so that their children can have Santa Claus. In January, they have to go back into the emergency accommodation.

I am dealing with a man whose partner died tragically by suicide last summer. She was on the verge of a home being bought by the tenant in situ scheme and tragically she died. He now is trying to raise their three-year-old son. He contacted me over Christmas. I had to go up to

him because he was so upset. I was seriously worried for him. Cork City Council knew his ex-partner. She was a lovely lady, a vibrant young woman. The weight of homelessness, the weight of not being able to provide a roof for your child, the weight of always being short of money and I suppose a thousand other things, because when you are in such a desperate situation - everything then combines on you. I was talking to that man. He works in the building line, he is in sport, hurling, mixed martial arts. He is a man's man, you would say. He cried to me on Christmas week because he had nowhere for his three-year-old child, his young son, and himself to go to. Jesus, this is what we are dealing with.

The Ministers say this Bill will improve things. I do not believe it will. When will it improve things? We have seen an increase in evictions since the Government announced it was bringing in this Bill on 1 March. I am not sure the Government gets it. People now have notices to quit and that is an eviction notice. "Notice to quit" is the nice way of putting it. It is an eviction notice. They are not all going to hit on 1 March. They are going to hit in April, May, June, July - right up the whole summer.

We will see a steady increase in the number of people becoming homeless. These will be more and more families. Even if you have a job, there is no security that you will be able to find somewhere to rent. I hold clinics on Mondays and I am now so busy that I am booking people two weeks in advance to see me. A couple came in to me last Monday. They told me that last year, their property was to be bought through the tenant in situ scheme. Happy days. Then the Government pulled it last April. I have the document that says that on 4 April last year, the Government pulled the scheme. Their landlord sold their property. They got €10,000 from the credit union to buy a mobile home to put in the back garden of a friend who lives just outside the city. They have two daughters, 11 and 13 years old. They told me about the shame the father has. He is a man and he is working. His wife is working and they have two kids and they are living in a mobile home. This is because the Government pulled the tenant in situ scheme. Granted, the Government reinstated it afterwards with new rules and regulations, which they would have still qualified for, but the landlord was so sick of waiting around for this Government that he sold the property and they were evicted. I will ask the Minister a straight question, which I asked Cork City Council, namely, who is going to give them a house? They are willing to pay, but as for the tenant in situ scheme, earlier the Minister, Deputy Browne, said he was looking to provide hope. Where is the hope for them? The Government also talks about preventing people going into emergency accommodation and preventing homelessness. The one thing that was working was the tenant in situ scheme and the Government broke it by modifying it. The representatives of the Government come in here and make promises to people. The only promises that this Bill will deliver will be increased rent, increased evictions and increased homelessness. I will finish with this. I swear to God I could talk about this all night because of the people I deal with every week. I do not know what I would do if I was in that position as a father knowing that there was nowhere for my children to go. Jesus Christ, God forgive me for cursing. How could any man or woman cope with that? How many children must become homeless before the Minister and the Government accept their policies are wrong? It is not just that they are wrong and not delivering, the policies are the problem because vested interests, vulture funds, speculators and profit are being put before ordinary, hard-working people who just want to have a safe home. How many children must become homeless?

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins):** I cannot accept amendments Nos. 9, 31 and 38. The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provided for an emergency period during which a landlord is prohibited, under section 5 of the Act, from serving a notice of termination.

Section 4 of the Act provided that the emergency period could only be extended from its initial three months, under very specific circumstances in the interest of public health during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government could, on the request of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage make - after consultation with the Minister for Health, and with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service, Reform and Digitalisation, - from time to time, by order extend the emergency period for such period as they considered appropriate if they were satisfied that, having regard to the threat to public health presented by Covid-19, the highly contagious nature of that disease, and the need to restrict the movement of persons in order to prevent the spread of the disease among the population, the making of such order was in the public interest.

As the emergency period under the Act expired on 1 August 2020, its provisions relating to residential tenancies are effectively spent. It would not be appropriate or legally sound to now use legislation intended to prevent the movement of persons in the interest of public health during a pandemic and to ease consequential rent affordability pressures, to introduce a three-year moratorium on tenancy terminations and rent increases at a time when thankfully, we have no pandemic to deal with.

Irrespective of how the Opposition wishes to give effect to an eviction ban or a rent freeze, the Government rejects such policy interventions. We wish to grow the supply of rental accommodation. We want to help renters into the future. We know that some renters are facing significant challenges, which Deputies have articulated in their contributions. The State provides support and assistance, where needed. The Government's new plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, will provide 90,000 affordable supports to help people secure a home of their own. Since 2022, 4,500 homes have been delivered by AHBs, local authorities and the LDA. There is a strong pipeline of future developments, with over 5,150 additional affordable purchase homes approved for support from the affordable housing fund across 22 local authority areas.

From budget 2026, cost-rental homes will be exempt from corporation tax, making projects more viable and ensuring the 25% discount is maintained. The rent tax credit, introduced in budget 2023, has been of significant help for renters, with almost 400,000 people benefiting in 2023. In budget 2026, the credit was extended for three more years, until the end of 2028. As promised in the programme for Government, the amount of the credit will increase gradually over the lifetime of this plan. A lengthy eviction ban or rent freeze would hamper supply and ultimately, help nobody. We do not have to look too far away from here. In Berlin, the Government introduced a rent freeze that resulted in a 50% reduction in rental supply within 12 months and was struck down by the Supreme Court there.

The Residential Tenancies Acts provide tenancy protections for both tenants and landlords. The constitutionally protected property rights of landlords have to be respected by the balanced provisions in both this Bill and the Residential Tenancies Acts. A landlord has the right to terminate a tenancy on one or more of the limited grounds for termination under the Acts. This Bill strengthens protections for tenants by restricting the rights of landlords to terminate a

tenancy, including on the ground of family occupation. I encourage anyone at risk of homelessness to make contact with their local authority for help.

For new tenancies, that is, first-time tenancies between parties created on or after 1 March 2026, a smaller landlord can only terminate a tenancy of minimum duration during its six-year term on the ground of occupation by the landlord or an immediate family member, which is restricted to a spouse, civil partner, child or parent, or both. A smaller landlord can terminate, as usual, on one or more of the limited grounds for termination at the end of this six-year tenancy of minimum duration. Landlords with four or more properties can only terminate a new tenancy where there is a breach of tenant obligations or the dwelling no longer suits the needs of the tenant household. As a result, I reiterate I cannot accept amendments Nos. 9, 31 and 38.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** It is deeply disappointing that the Minister of State is rejecting these amendments. I also cannot wrap my head around the fact that the Minister, Deputy Browne, said he does not tolerate or accept one child being homeless. Right now, the Minister of State could prevent thousands of children becoming homeless in the coming months by agreeing to this amendment but he is not doing it. He shakes his head, but of course he could. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, referred to the emergency situation during Covid. This is an emergency situation. Of course he could if he wanted to. The constitutional right to private property is mitigated by the principles of social justice, as he knows, and the common good.

*10 o'clock*

In this case, I challenge the Minister to introduce it as we have put forward here. I challenge him to implement that and see what landlord is going to come forward, bring it to court and see if it does not stand up. The Minister will not do that just like the Government will not have a referendum to hold a right to housing to make housing a human right because it does not believe that it is a human right. As I said earlier, it is willingly accepting homelessness and levels of homelessness that are absolutely intolerable and has done for years. I do not see it as normal or acceptable for a child being homeless, but the Minister does despite his claims to the contrary. If he did not, he would implement a no-fault eviction ban that would prevent thousands of families and their children becoming homeless. The homeless figures that we get each month are only the tip of the iceberg. Thousands more are being made homeless but going into situations of hidden homelessness.

Deputy Boyd Barrett was right to outline the human cost of this and what the human reality is, which I also spoke about earlier. What is really sad right now is that we do not talk about the children anymore. We do not talk about the situations in Temple Street that I spoke about years ago where the doctors explained that they were seeing and are continuing to see, but no one talks about it, children presenting with their families with burns because they were in cramped emergency accommodation pulling kettles down on themselves. Babies were not learning to crawl because literally the space is not there. It is still going on. There are children right now in hotels, hostels and family hubs whose lives are being irreparably damaged by growing up in emergency accommodation. That is an emergency. That is the experience of thousands of children. I cannot get my head around how the Government will not implement a measure that it knows would prevent that for more children.

The homeless services say that the eviction ban did prevent people going into homelessness and opened up a space where they could then work on getting those in emergency accommodation out. They were not dealing with a constant flow in of homelessness. That is one of the really frustrating aspects of the Bill. The Minister said the security of tenure this is going to introduce is historic and huge. As I have said over and over, it does nothing for the hundreds of thousands of existing renters. Yet the Minister could do it. He could accept this amendment. It is so frustrating to be here knowing that he could do something that would prevent homelessness, but he will not do it. It is a disgrace. It makes hollow all these claims he has made that he cares about homelessness, and he is treating it as an emergency. No, he is not. To treat it as an emergency would be to implement a no-fault eviction ban across the board. He said that landlords will flee and more landlords will sell up. If there was a no-fault eviction ban and a landlord did sell up, the family or individual would still be there. They could sell their property as they do in other countries, such as Belgium. Why will the Minister not do that? It is because he will not step up and state, "We believe housing is a human right. This is an emergency. We will take these measures." The Government is introducing a Bill that still very much does not addressing fundamental causes of our housing and homelessness crisis. We will continue to see it. Instead, the Government is going to make it much worse with higher rents.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** If the Minister is not going to accept amendment No. 9, I plead with him to accept amendment No. 38. This amendment proposes to amend the table in section 34 of the 2004 Act, which sets out the ground for the termination of a tenancy. The ground specified in paragraph four of the table is that "the landlord requires the dwelling or the property containing the dwelling for his or her own occupation or for occupation by a member of his or her family". In my view and in the opinion of many people, this provision is much abused. This amendment proposes a balancing exercise that use for a family member should not be a ground for evicting a tenant if the tenant would be placed at risk of homelessness. Politics is about choices. The choice the Minister is making is going to increase homelessness. That is a fact. It is going to put rents up.

In relation to my other amendment, there was 35% surge in evictions after the moratorium was lifted. I am not arguing for a permanent eviction moratorium. I am arguing for a moratorium to give us some breathing space. We will not get to it, but this is in a similar vein to why I tabled an amendment in relation to a rent break if rents exceeded 15% within a three-year period. When the eviction moratorium was in place, family homelessness fell by 39%.

Like every Deputy and I am sure the Minister included, my constituency clinics are inundated with notices to quit. At this stage, I have over 100 notices to quit on the books in my office. I do not know what to tell people because in many cases they are being forced to leave their homes and if they are lucky, they will get emergency accommodation. Emergency accommodation in Limerick is often at capacity. On Monday, a man attended my clinic wondering how he would explain to his autistic child that the family were going to be made imminently homeless. Things have gotten so bad at this stage that all I am looking for with the first amendment is a breathing space and with the second amendment, to tighten up that provision to ensure that people are not being evicted on spurious grounds.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It was interesting to hear what the Minister of State said in response to the instance that I set out of the couple and their child. I was just looking through the details of the case. They brought their youngest child with them. As I was reading over the details of the case, I realised that they have a daughter as well. Their son is two-years-old with special needs and autism. He was just diagnosed. They also have a nine-year-old daughter who has complex special needs. I was looking at the email they sent me describing their extreme anxiety and concern about what homelessness would mean and all of that for them in terms of the services that they are trying to access. They are waiting for those services as well to get an occupational therapist for their kid and what they will do if they have to move to another area even if they tried to move to another area. It is interesting that the homeless HAP limit that they were given to allow them to look for somewhere is high as €2,525. They are looking all the time and cannot find anywhere. The Minister wants those rents to go even higher. They will in my area. They will go up to €3,000 and €3,500.

In the hopeless situation that they are in, all the Minister of State said is that they should engage with the local authority about emergency accommodation. I said to him that what they are being told, and families like them are being told week in and week out, is to go to a hostel in Dublin city centre with their kids, which they would be absolutely terrified to do. That is why the mother of these children kept bursting into tears. I could see it. She was envisaging in her head the prospect of bringing her kids into a hostel. She immediately burst into tears. Her partner was desperately trying to comfort her. Has the Minister of State got any other advice?

We are asking for the prevention of evictions of vulnerable children like these and of two lovely parents in their 20s, who are both working hard to try to make their way in life and contribute to society. If the Minister will not do what is asked for in these amendments, which is to prevent people like them from being evicted into homelessness, can he offer anything more than saying, when I have explained the reality of the situation, that they should engage with the local authority regarding emergency accommodation? Given where they are on the list, they will be languishing in emergency housing for years. Let us be under absolutely no illusion that already vulnerable children with special needs will be damaged by that experience, possibly forever. There is not a shadow of a doubt about it. The best we can offer them and the many people like them is to say they should engage with the local authority.

This point is relevant to the provisions in the Bill. In the case of the parents I mentioned, because their daughter will soon turn ten, their need is for a three-bedroom home. When there are children of opposite sexes, they are not supposed to share a room after one of them reaches ten years of age. The parents now must look for three-bedroom accommodation, which is completely impossible to find. People can forget about getting such a property from the council. We are talking about being on the list for a decade. In their desperation, the parents asked whether there was any chance they could look for a two-bedroom property. It would still be very difficult to find one under HAP but there might be some chance of it. However, that is not allowed because it would mean they were moving into overcrowding.

This is the dilemma. We go to the council and suggest that people in this desperate situation, to avoid homelessness, be allowed to move into an overcrowded place. Of course, if these parents are made homeless in the next week, which is the deadline by which they must leave, they will definitely be overcrowded if they have to go into a hostel in the city. Indeed, it will

be worse overcrowding because they will probably all be in one room together, as are many of the homeless families with whom I deal. We can put such families into one bedroom in emergency accommodation but the councils cannot give them a two-bedroom home because that is deemed to be overcrowding and not to meet their housing need.

There is a dilemma here for local authorities and it will be even more so the case if this Bill is enacted, because one of the grounds on which evictions are still allowed is that landlords, big and small, can evict if their property is not suitable to a family's needs, which includes where there is overcrowding. That is a justification for evicting families. We really are on the horns of a dilemma in that families might have a chance of getting a property that is very far from perfect and in which they will be overcrowded but if they do so, they are then vulnerable to eviction by a landlord. The latter might say the property is not suitable to their needs if at any point that landlord decides he or she could get more rent by getting in people for whom the property is deemed appropriate to their needs.

That is the mess we are in, or more to the point, that is the mess in which families in this situation find themselves. They are absolutely terrified for the well-being of their children and for themselves. The Minister could stop this, even on a temporary basis. He said we should thank God we are not in a pandemic. The dictionary definition of "pandemic" does not just refer to a global epidemic but is also applicable to something affecting a whole country. There is, in fact, a pandemic in Ireland. There is a pandemic of homelessness and a pandemic of housing crisis. If ever a housing and homelessness crisis could be described as a pandemic, it is the one we are living through. It is a pandemic in the literal meaning of the word and it justifies taking emergency measures to prevent damage being done to the children who will be homeless if we do not come up with a better answer than sending their parents to engage with the local authority about emergency accommodation in Dublin city centre.

**Deputy John Cummins:** Nobody in this Chamber has a monopoly on understanding and compassion for families and individuals-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We are looking for answers.

**Deputy John Cummins:** With all due respect, I did not interrupt the Deputy. Nobody here has a monopoly on compassion when it comes to the difficulties and challenges being faced by individuals and families regarding the shortage of housing supply, whether social, affordable or rental. At my constituency offices in Waterford city and Dungarvan, I deal with constituents in the exact same way as do other Deputies. The Minister and I are not blind to the challenges facing the public. We have a difference of view on how to address those challenges.

The Government is investing record sums in increasing provision of social and affordable housing to try to assist the very people of whom we have been speaking. Our housing plan commits to deliver 72,000 social homes and 90,000 starter home supports. Contrary to what was said by Deputies on the opposite side of the Chamber, everything in this Bill is about trying to enhance protections to ensure there is a reduction in notices of termination. That is what is contained in the Bill. Deputies can dress it up and try to present and package it in a different way but the fact is there will be restrictions on notices of termination as a result of the measures we are putting in place.

In his amendment No. 38, Deputy Sheehan seeks to restrict the grounds for evictions where a family member has to return. I ask him to consider that we want rental properties to be put on the rental market where, for example, a family member is going off to work abroad. Is it better for such a property to sit vacant because that person will need it on his or her return or for it to be put on the rental market? I would argue it is better that it be put on the rental market and put to good use while the person is abroad. The Deputy's amendment would prevent that person from being able to return to the property.

Balances must always be found when it comes to putting legislation in place. That is why we are not accepting the amendments that have been put before us. It is all about balance and, contrary to the contributions we have heard from Opposition Deputies, the Government is trying to strike that balance.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The Minister of State said no one has a monopoly on compassion. I have a couple of questions for him and the Minister. How many children must become homeless before they admit their policies are wrong and are contributing to making homelessness worse? It is a straightforward question. Will they give a commitment that this Bill will not drive up rents? Everyone on this side of the Chamber and every expert who presented to the housing committee said it will but the Government is saying we are all wrong. Will they give a commitment that the Bill will not drive up notices to quit and evictions over the coming months? Will they give a commitment that the Bill will reduce homelessness? None of us believes any of those claims.

I have asked direct, straight and hard questions. The Minister and the Ministers of State are telling us the Bill will help to solve the housing crisis and homelessness emergency and provide additional homes. We do not believe it will do so. We believe the result will be the opposite. We were told we were wrong by the previous Ministers, Deputy O'Brien, Simon Coveney and Eoghan Murphy.

They brought in policies and told us we were all wrong and these would fix them. The Government is coming back here again now telling us we are wrong again when there are over 5,000 children homeless tonight, and that is not even counting the hidden homeless. Can we have straight answers to straight questions? The Minister, Deputy Browne, said there will be a review in 12 months after this legislation comes in to see how it operates. In 12 months' time, after this has come in, if rents, evictions and child homelessness increase, will the Government fall on its sword and admit it was wrong?

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I want to come back in on that. Numerous cases were upheld by the RTB where it was found that this provision was abused with people being evicted from their property. What I am trying to do in this amendment is simply to tighten it up where there is a specific risk to the tenant being made homeless. That is all.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Minister and I disagree. He is absolutely right that no one has a monopoly on compassion, but I honestly believe the Government has an obligation, as do I as a representative, to say something to the family I am talking about. The Minister has a responsibility for all the families who come into him. It is just not good enough to tell people to engage with their local authorities about emergency accommodation. Does the Minister

think it is? I certainly do not. I have described the situation of the couple and I could describe an endless number of other cases that are on my books at the moment and people who are coming in week in, week out. They are absolutely terrified in their situations for their children. Would the Minister allow his children to be put in a situation that would damage them? I think the Minister would do anything – in fact I do not want to personalise this, because that is wrong too. However, any parent would do absolutely anything to prevent their child being put in that sort of situation. We should not be in a situation where we have to turn around and tell people that there is nothing we can do, and that their daughter and son with special needs who are vulnerable will just have to suck it up, as they will, and will have to go into that hostel even though it will be very bad for them. I seriously worry about the mental health of the mother in particular, after the engagement I had with her, about how she will be able to cope so it is just not good enough to say that.

I hear from the Minister, as I have heard from successive Ministers, that the Government is developing policies to prevent people going into homelessness. If the Minister will not do what is in this amendment, will he please tell me what he is doing to prevent this and other families going into homelessness? Tell me. Is there another answer I am missing? Is there something I have not heard? Is there some policy the Minister is developing that will prevent this situation where the family has to end up in emergency accommodation next week? If the Minister cannot give that alternative suggestion, the best one going is the one being proposed in these amendments, which is, even on an emergency basis, to say “sorry, you will not be allowed to evict these people into homelessness”. We need to freeze that possibility until we sort out this mess, which is certainly not the fault of this family or these kids. Whatever differences we have on policy and all the rest, we should say we will not put them into a worse position, an unacceptable position, until we have managed to sort out the bigger problem. That is what we are asking. Can the Minister tell me he has a better answer for them or is he just saying that he, I and Deputies Ó Broin, Sheehan and Hearne have to tell our constituents that there is nothing we can do and that at some point it might improve - we cannot say when exactly - when the investors in New York decide to reduce rents?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister does not wish to respond.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** No answer.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Do any further Deputies wish to contribute?

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I have asked the Minister straight questions. At least, we should get answers to those questions. The Minister said a while ago that there will be a review in 12 months. If that review does not show an improvement in matters, will the Government fall on its sword, admit it is wrong and at least let the Opposition bring forward solutions? I asked three other questions about the rise in rents, the rise in evictions and the rise in homelessness. These are questions I am looking for an answer to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Does the Minister wish to respond?

**Deputy James Browne:** I answered on the amendments.

Amendment put:

| The Committee divided: Tá, 69; Níl, 81; 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.              |       |
| Clarke, Sorca.                                    | Burke, Colm.                |       |
| Collins, Michael.                                 | Burke, Peter.               |       |
| Conway-Walsh, Rose.                               | Butler, Mary.               |       |
| Coppinger, Ruth.                                  | Butterly, Paula.            |       |
| Cronin, Réada.                                    | Buttimer, Jerry.            |       |
| Crowe, Seán.                                      | Byrne, Malcolm.             |       |
| Cullinane, David.                                 | Cahill, Michael.            |       |
| Cummins, Jen.                                     | Callaghan, Catherine.       |       |
| Daly, Pa.                                         | Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer. |       |
| Devine, Máire.                                    | Chambers, Jack.             |       |
| Doherty, Pearse.                                  | Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.       |       |
| Donnelly, Paul.                                   | Clendennen, John.           |       |
| Ellis, Dessie.                                    | Collins, Niall.             |       |
| Fitzmaurice, Michael.                             | Connolly, John.             |       |
| Gannon, Gary.                                     | Cooney, Joe.                |       |
| Gibney, Sinéad.                                   | Cummins, John.              |       |
| Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.                           | Currie, Emer.               |       |
| Gould, Thomas.                                    | Daly, Martin.               |       |
| Graves, Ann.                                      | Dempsey, Aisling.           |       |
| Guirke, Johnny.                                   | Dillon, Alan.               |       |
| Hayes, Eoin.                                      | Dolan, Albert.              |       |
| Healy, Seamus.                                    | Feighan, Frankie.           |       |
| Hearne, Rory.                                     | Fleming, Sean.              |       |
| Kelly, Alan.                                      | Foley, Norma.               |       |
| Kenny, Eoghan.                                    | Gallagher, Pat the Cope.    |       |
| Kenny, Martin.                                    | Geoghegan, James.           |       |
| Kerrane, Claire.                                  | Grealish, Noel.             |       |
| Lawless, Paul.                                    | Harkin, Marian.             |       |
| Lawlor, George.                                   | Harris, Simon.              |       |
| Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.                           | Healy-Rae, Danny.           |       |
| McDonald, Mary Lou.                               | Healy-Rae, Michael.         |       |
| McGettigan, Donna.                                | Heneghan, Barry.            |       |
| McGuinness, Conor D.                              | Heydon, Martin.             |       |
| Mitchell, Denise.                                 | Higgins, Emer.              |       |
| Murphy, Paul.                                     | Keogh, Keira.               |       |
| Mythen, Johnny.                                   | Lahart, John.               |       |
| Nash, Ged.                                        | Lawless, James.             |       |

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|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Newsome Drennan, Natasha. | Lowry, Michael.             |  |
| Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  | Maxwell, David.             |  |
| Nolan, Carol.             | McAuliffe, Paul.            |  |
| O'Callaghan, Cian.        | McCarthy, Noel.             |  |
| O'Donoghue, Richard.      | McConalogue, Charlie.       |  |
| O'Donoghue, Robert.       | McCormack, Tony.            |  |
| O'Gorman, Roderic.        | McGrath, Séamus.            |  |
| O'Hara, Louis.            | McGreehan, Erin.            |  |
| O'Reilly, Louise.         | Moran, Kevin Boxer.         |  |
| O'Rourke, Darren.         | Moynihan, Aindrias.         |  |
| Ó Broin, Eoin.            | Moynihan, Michael.          |  |
| Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         | Moynihan, Shane.            |  |
| Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       | Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. |  |
| Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. | Murphy, Michael.            |  |
| Quaide, Liam.             | Naughton, Hildegard.        |  |
| Quinlivan, Maurice.       | Neville, Joe.               |  |
| Rice, Pádraig.            | O'Callaghan, Jim.           |  |
| Sheehan, Conor.           | O'Connell, Maeve.           |  |
| Smith, Duncan.            | O'Connor, James.            |  |
| Stanley, Brian.           | O'Dea, Willie.              |  |
| Tóibín, Peadar.           | O'Donnell, Kieran.          |  |
| Wall, Mark.               | O'Donovan, Patrick.         |  |
| Ward, Charles.            | O'Meara, Ryan.              |  |
| Ward, Mark.               | O'Shea, John Paul.          |  |
|                           | O'Sullivan, Christopher.    |  |
|                           | O'Sullivan, Pádraig.        |  |
|                           | Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |  |
|                           | Ó Feargháil, Seán.          |  |
|                           | Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |  |
|                           | Richmond, Neale.            |  |
|                           | Roche, Peter.               |  |
|                           | Scanlon, Eamon.             |  |
|                           | Smith, Brendan.             |  |
|                           | Smyth, Niamh.               |  |
|                           | Timmins, Edward.            |  |
|                           | Troy, Robert.               |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Conor Sheehan and Rory Hearne; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of 10 February 2026: "That in respect of each of the sections undisposed of the section is hereby agreed to in committee; the Title is hereby agreed to in committee; the Bill is accordingly reported to the House without amendment; Fourth Stage is hereby completed; and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put.

The Dáil divided by electronic means.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** As the gap is less than ten votes, and because of the outrageous legislation this is for so many families across this State, we are calling for a vote by other than electronic means.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Other than electronic means is a roll call vote.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** 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, 80; Níl, 70; Staon, 0. |                         |       |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                     | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.          |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.           |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.         |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard.  |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.            |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.           |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.          |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Carthy, Matt.           |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Clarke, Sorca.          |       |
| Burke, Peter.                                | Collins, Michael.       |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Conway-Walsh, Rose.     |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Coppinger, Ruth.        |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Cronin, Réada.          |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Crowe, Seán.            |       |
| Cahill, Michael.                             | Cullinane, David.       |       |
| Callaghan, Catherine.                        | Cummins, Jen.           |       |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.                  | Daly, Pa.               |       |
| Chambers, Jack.                              | Devine, Máire.          |       |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.                        | Doherty, Pearse.        |       |
| Clendennen, John.                            | Donnelly, Paul.         |       |
| Collins, Niall.                              | Ellis, Dessie.          |       |
| Connolly, John.                              | Fitzmaurice, Michael.   |       |
| Cooney, Joe.                                 | Gannon, Gary.           |       |
| Cummins, John.                               | Gibney, Sinéad.         |       |
| Currie, Emer.                                | Gogarty, Paul Nicholas. |       |
| Daly, Martin.                                | Gould, Thomas.          |       |
| Dempsey, Aisling.                            | Graves, Ann.            |       |
| Dillon, Alan.                                | Guirke, Johnny.         |       |
| Dolan, Albert.                               | Hayes, Eoin.            |       |
| Feighan, Frankie.                            | Healy-Rae, Danny.       |       |
| Fleming, Sean.                               | Healy, Seamus.          |       |
| Foley, Norma.                                | Hearne, Rory.           |       |

|                             |                           |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.    | Kelly, Alan.              |  |
| Geoghegan, James.           | Kenny, Eoghan.            |  |
| Grealish, Noel.             | Kenny, Martin.            |  |
| Harkin, Marian.             | Kerrane, Claire.          |  |
| Harris, Simon.              | Lawless, Paul.            |  |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.         | Lawlor, George.           |  |
| Heneghan, Barry.            | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.   |  |
| Heydon, Martin.             | McDonald, Mary Lou.       |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | McGettigan, Donna.        |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | McGuinness, Conor D.      |  |
| Lahart, John.               | Mitchell, Denise.         |  |
| Lawless, James.             | Murphy, Paul.             |  |
| Lowry, Michael.             | Mythen, Johnny.           |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | Nash, Ged.                |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | Nolan, Carol.             |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | O'Donoghue, Richard.      |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| Moynihan, Michael.          | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| Moynihan, Shane.            | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| O'Connor, James.            | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |
| O'Dea, Willie.              | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          | Smith, Duncan.            |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.              | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| O'Sullivan, Pádraig.        | Ward, Mark.               |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |                           |  |
| Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.          |                           |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |                           |  |
| Richmond, Neale.            |                           |  |
| Roche, Peter.               |                           |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.             |                           |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                           |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.               |                           |  |
| Timmins, Edward.            |                           |  |
| Troy, Robert.               |                           |  |

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

Question declared carried.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 13 - Office of Public Works.

### **Regulation of Drones Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Roderic O'Gorman on Thursday, 29 January 2026: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

Dáil Éireann resolves that the Regulation of Drones Bill 2025 be read a second time on this day 12 months, to allow for the actions set out in the National Policy Framework for Unmanned Aircraft Systems and agreed by Government to be progressed and to allow for a full examination of the legal and policy implications of the Bill's provisions to be undertaken.

- (Minister for Transport)

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Regulation of Drones Bill 2025, which was taken on Thursday, 29 January 2026. On the question, "That the amendment to the motion be made", a division was claimed, and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

| The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 68; Staon, 0. |                        |       |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                    | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.         |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.          |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.        |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard. |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.           |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.          |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.         |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Carthy, Matt.          |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Clarke, Sorca.         |       |

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|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Burke, Peter.               | Collins, Michael.         |  |
| Butler, Mary.               | Conway-Walsh, Rose.       |  |
| Butterly, Paula.            | Coppinger, Ruth.          |  |
| Buttimer, Jerry.            | Cronin, Réada.            |  |
| Byrne, Malcolm.             | Crowe, Seán.              |  |
| Cahill, Michael.            | Cullinane, David.         |  |
| Callaghan, Catherine.       | Cummins, Jen.             |  |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer. | Daly, Pa.                 |  |
| Chambers, Jack.             | Devine, Máire.            |  |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.       | Doherty, Pearse.          |  |
| Clendennen, John.           | Donnelly, Paul.           |  |
| Collins, Niall.             | Ellis, Dessie.            |  |
| Connolly, John.             | Fitzmaurice, Michael.     |  |
| Cooney, Joe.                | Gannon, Gary.             |  |
| Cummins, John.              | Gibney, Sinéad.           |  |
| Currie, Emer.               | Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.   |  |
| Daly, Martin.               | Gould, Thomas.            |  |
| Dempsey, Aisling.           | Graves, Ann.              |  |
| Dillon, Alan.               | Guirke, Johnny.           |  |
| Dolan, Albert.              | Hayes, Eoin.              |  |
| Feighan, Frankie.           | Healy, Seamus.            |  |
| Fleming, Sean.              | Hearne, Rory.             |  |
| Foley, Norma.               | Kelly, Alan.              |  |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.    | Kenny, Eoghan.            |  |
| Geoghegan, James.           | Kenny, Martin.            |  |
| Grealish, Noel.             | Kerrane, Claire.          |  |
| Harkin, Marian.             | Lawless, Paul.            |  |
| Harris, Simon.              | Lawlor, George.           |  |
| Healy-Rae, Danny.           | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.   |  |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.         | McDonald, Mary Lou.       |  |
| Heneghan, Barry.            | McGettigan, Donna.        |  |
| Heydon, Martin.             | McGuinness, Conor D.      |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | Mitchell, Denise.         |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | Murphy, Paul.             |  |
| Lahart, John.               | Mythen, Johnny.           |  |
| Lawless, James.             | Nash, Ged.                |  |
| Lowry, Michael.             | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | O'Donoghue, Richard.      |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| McGuinness, John.           | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| Moynihan, Michael.          | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |

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| Moynihan, Shane.            | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| Nolan, Carol.               | Smith, Duncan.            |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| O'Dea, Willie.              | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         | Ward, Mark.               |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.              |                           |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Pádraig.        |                           |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |                           |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |                           |  |
| Richmond, Neale.            |                           |  |
| Roche, Peter.               |                           |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.             |                           |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                           |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.               |                           |  |
| Timmins, Edward.            |                           |  |
| Toole, Gillian.             |                           |  |
| Troy, Robert.               |                           |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Roderic O'Gorman and Ciarán Ahern.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

### **Bord Bia: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Martin Kenny on Wednesday, 4 February 2026.

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

- that Bord Bia's mission statement is to bring Ireland's outstanding food, drink and horticulture to the world, thus enabling growth and sustainability of producers;
- the importance of Irish food and drink exports to the Irish economy;
- the importance of Ireland's reputation around the world as a food producer;
- that the Irish food and drinks industry is dependent on Irish farmers as the primary producer; and

— the animal health and welfare standards that Irish farmers must adhere to, and in particular the standards and conditions that are part of Bord Bia's Sustainable Quality Assurance Scheme;

further notes that:

— Irish farmers and their representative organisations have lost confidence in the Chairperson of Bord Bia, as a result of his company's role in importing Brazilian beef into Ireland; and

— continuing as Chairperson undermines public confidence in Bord Bia, and damages Ireland's reputation as a world leader producing food that adheres to the highest standards; and

calls on the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to use his powers under section 18 (1) of the An Bord Bia Act, 1994 to remove from office a member of the Board, with immediate effect.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "further notes that" and substitute the following:

"— the Board of Bord Bia, including the Chair, is made up of 15 members from across all areas of the agri-food sector, and its function is to promote, assist and develop, in any manner which the Board considers necessary or desirable, the marketing of Irish food and livestock;

— the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine estimates that total Irish agri-food exports in 2025 will be a record €21 billion;

— the growth in the value of agri-food exports has been remarkable, increasing from an exports value of €10 billion in 2011;

— beef exports to some 70 countries have increased over the last five years by 40 per cent, from €2.2 billion in 2019 to €3.1 billion in 2024, an increase of €890 million;

— Bord Bia is carrying out its mission to a high standard, making its contribution along with farmers and the wider agri-food industry to the export success of a vital sector;

— the Origin Green programme, supported by the work of farmers' and their participation in Quality Assurance Schemes at farm level, has been integral in providing proof points to international customers of the quality and sustainability of Irish food and drink products, and creating market opportunities for that produce;

— the Board of Bord Bia has discussed the issues raised, and the majority agreed outcome was to support the Chairperson to continue in office, with all of the Board members strongly endorsing the personal integrity and experience of the Chair, and acknowledged that there was no legal or governance issue at play;

— the Chairperson has accepted an invitation to appear at the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture and Food on Thursday 5th February to discuss the issues raised; and

— the Government retains confidence in the Chairperson."

- (Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine)

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding Bord Bia. On Wednesday, 4 February 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

| The Dáil divided: Tá, 89; Níl, 61; Staon, 0. |                         |       |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                     | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.          |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.           |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.         |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard.  |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.            |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.           |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.          |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Carthy, Matt.           |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Clarke, Sorca.          |       |
| Burke, Peter.                                | Collins, Michael.       |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Conway-Walsh, Rose.     |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Coppinger, Ruth.        |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Cronin, Réada.          |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Crowe, Seán.            |       |
| Cahill, Michael.                             | Cullinane, David.       |       |
| Callaghan, Catherine.                        | Daly, Pa.               |       |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.                  | Devine, Máire.          |       |
| Chambers, Jack.                              | Doherty, Pearse.        |       |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.                        | Donnelly, Paul.         |       |
| Clendennen, John.                            | Ellis, Dessie.          |       |
| Collins, Niall.                              | Fitzmaurice, Michael.   |       |
| Connolly, John.                              | Gould, Thomas.          |       |
| Cooney, Joe.                                 | Graves, Ann.            |       |
| Cummins, Jen.                                | Guirke, Johnny.         |       |
| Cummins, John.                               | Healy-Rae, Danny.       |       |
| Currie, Emer.                                | Healy, Seamus.          |       |
| Daly, Martin.                                | Kelly, Alan.            |       |
| Dempsey, Aisling.                            | Kenny, Eoghan.          |       |
| Dillon, Alan.                                | Kenny, Martin.          |       |
| Dolan, Albert.                               | Kerrane, Claire.        |       |
| Feighan, Frankie.                            | Lawless, Paul.          |       |
| Fleming, Sean.                               | Lawlor, George.         |       |
| Foley, Norma.                                | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig. |       |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.                     | McDonald, Mary Lou.     |       |
| Gannon, Gary.                                | McGettigan, Donna.      |       |
| Geoghegan, James.                            | McGuinness, Conor D.    |       |
| Gibney, Sinéad.                              | Mitchell, Denise.       |       |
| Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.                      | Murphy, Paul.           |       |
| Grealish, Noel.                              | Mythen, Johnny.         |       |
| Harkin, Marian.                              | Nash, Ged.              |       |

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| Harris, Simon.              | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| Hayes, Eoin.                | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.         | Nolan, Carol.             |  |
| Hearne, Rory.               | O'Donoghue, Richard.      |  |
| Heneghan, Barry.            | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| Heydon, Martin.             | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| Lahart, John.               | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| Lawless, James.             | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| Lowry, Michael.             | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | Smith, Duncan.            |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| Moynihan, Michael.          | Ward, Mark.               |  |
| Moynihan, Shane.            |                           |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. |                           |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            |                           |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        |                           |  |
| Neville, Joe.               |                           |  |
| O'Callaghan, Cian.          |                           |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           |                           |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           |                           |  |
| O'Connor, James.            |                           |  |
| O'Dea, Willie.              |                           |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          |                           |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         |                           |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.              |                           |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Pádraig.        |                           |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |                           |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |                           |  |
| Quaide, Liam.               |                           |  |
| Rice, Pádraig.              |                           |  |
| Richmond, Neale.            |                           |  |
| Roche, Peter.               |                           |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.             |                           |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                           |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.               |                           |  |
| Timmins, Edward.            |                           |  |
| Toole, Gillian.             |                           |  |

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| Troy, Robert. |  |  |
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Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Martin Kenny.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

| The Dáil divided: Tá, 88; Níl, 61; Staon, 0. |                         |       |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                     | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.          |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.           |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.         |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard.  |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.            |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.           |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.          |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Carthy, Matt.           |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Clarke, Sorca.          |       |
| Burke, Peter.                                | Collins, Michael.       |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Conway-Walsh, Rose.     |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Coppinger, Ruth.        |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Cronin, Réada.          |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Crowe, Seán.            |       |
| Cahill, Michael.                             | Cullinane, David.       |       |
| Callaghan, Catherine.                        | Daly, Pa.               |       |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.                  | Devine, Máire.          |       |
| Chambers, Jack.                              | Doherty, Pearse.        |       |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.                        | Donnelly, Paul.         |       |
| Clendennen, John.                            | Ellis, Dessie.          |       |
| Collins, Niall.                              | Fitzmaurice, Michael.   |       |
| Connolly, John.                              | Gould, Thomas.          |       |
| Cooney, Joe.                                 | Graves, Ann.            |       |
| Cummins, Jen.                                | Guirke, Johnny.         |       |
| Cummins, John.                               | Healy-Rae, Danny.       |       |
| Currie, Emer.                                | Healy, Seamus.          |       |
| Daly, Martin.                                | Kelly, Alan.            |       |
| Dempsey, Aisling.                            | Kenny, Eoghan.          |       |
| Dillon, Alan.                                | Kenny, Martin.          |       |
| Dolan, Albert.                               | Kerrane, Claire.        |       |
| Feighan, Frankie.                            | Lawless, Paul.          |       |
| Fleming, Sean.                               | Lawlor, George.         |       |
| Foley, Norma.                                | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig. |       |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.                     | McDonald, Mary Lou.     |       |
| Gannon, Gary.                                | McGettigan, Donna.      |       |
| Geoghegan, James.                            | McGuinness, Conor D.    |       |
| Gibney, Sinéad.                              | Mitchell, Denise.       |       |
| Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.                      | Murphy, Paul.           |       |

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|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Grealish, Noel.             | Mythen, Johnny.           |  |
| Harkin, Marian.             | Nash, Ged.                |  |
| Harris, Simon.              | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| Hayes, Eoin.                | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.         | Nolan, Carol.             |  |
| Hearne, Rory.               | O'Donoghue, Richard.      |  |
| Heneghan, Barry.            | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| Heydon, Martin.             | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| Lahart, John.               | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| Lawless, James.             | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| Lowry, Michael.             | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | Smith, Duncan.            |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| Moynihan, Michael.          | Ward, Mark.               |  |
| Moynihan, Shane.            |                           |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. |                           |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            |                           |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        |                           |  |
| Neville, Joe.               |                           |  |
| O'Callaghan, Cian.          |                           |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           |                           |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           |                           |  |
| O'Connor, James.            |                           |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          |                           |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         |                           |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.              |                           |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Pádraig.        |                           |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |                           |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |                           |  |
| Quaide, Liam.               |                           |  |
| Rice, Pádraig.              |                           |  |
| Richmond, Neale.            |                           |  |
| Roche, Peter.               |                           |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.             |                           |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                           |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.               |                           |  |
| Timmins, Edward.            |                           |  |

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| Toole, Gillian. |  |  |
| Troy, Robert.   |  |  |

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

Question declared carried.

### **Cost-of-Living Crisis: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Seamus Healy on Thursday, 5 February 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- a cost-of-living crisis exists in this State;
- Budget 2026 was predicated on an inflation rate of 2 per cent, but it is now at 3.2 per cent;
- prices have increased by 23.5 per cent in the last five years;
- food prices have increased by 5 per cent in the last year;
- Irish electricity prices are among the highest in the European Union (EU), 24 per cent higher than the EU average;
- electricity companies have announced an average increase of 10 per cent;
- gas prices have almost doubled in the last five years;
- private house rents have continued to skyrocket, up 4.7 per cent year-on-year and reaching €2,100 per month in Dublin;
- house prices have increased 8.1 per cent year-on-year;
- council house rents have increased, including charging extra rent for person's carer's allowance;
- motor insurance premiums have increased by 17 per cent;
- toll charges have increased;
- Local Property Tax has increased;
- student fees have increased; and
- childcare fees continue to be at mortgage repayment levels;

further notes that:

- 11.7 per cent of the population, 629,425 people, are living in poverty, including:
  - 190,108 or 15.3 per cent of children;

- 106,385 or 13 per cent of over 65s;
  - 69,244 or 1 in 3 of persons with a long-term illness or a disability; and
  - 140,377 workers;
  - 298,000 households are in arrears on electricity bills;
  - 185,000 households are in arrears on gas bills;
  - according to the Parliamentary Budget Office, the withdrawal of the once-off cost of living payments will increase general poverty to 12.6 per cent, child poverty to 15.6 per cent, older persons to 17.6 per cent, and decrease the annual income of the poorest 20 per cent of households by 4.15 per cent;
  - the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SVP) received 260,000 requests for help in 2025, up 6 per cent on 2024; and
  - the SVP received 33,214 energy requests in November 2025 which was the highest ever; and
- calls on the Government to:
- stop the price gouging of food and energy companies;
  - appoint an agri-food regulator to tackle rip-off food costs;
  - introduce price control of food, electricity, gas and fuel costs;
  - implement a rent freeze;
  - implement a living wage;
  - benchmark social welfare increases to the minimum essential standard of living index;
  - introduce a weekly cost of disability payment;
  - introduce the promised maximum €200 per month child-care cost and commence immediately with the creation of a public child-care service;
  - commence the introduction of a free public transport system;
  - introduce a second targeted tier of child benefit;
  - reinstate energy credits with the immediate payment of a €500 winter payment; and
  - introduce a millionaires wealth tax.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

- the Government is acutely aware of, and concerned about, the impact of rising prices on Irish households, and it is also aware of the high cost of energy prices and the wider impact of the cost of doing business for firms, particularly small firms;

— in relation to Irish households, the Government has already taken the following measures;

— €28.9 billion will be spent on social protection in 2026, including over €1.15 billion of new measures targeted to assist the most vulnerable in our society with the cost of living;

— the supports provided in the budget package helps vulnerable households with the cost of energy bills, such as an increase in the Fuel Allowance scheme and extended eligibility to recipients of the Working Family Payment (WFP);

— the increase of €10 in weekly social welfare primary payments is equivalent to approximately 4.1 per cent, and for pensions the increase is about 3.5 per cent, both above the rate of inflation; and

— these increases follow on from the increase in payment rates in Budget 2025 that were also above the rate of inflation;

recognises, with regard to disability:

— that a Strategic Focus Network Summit on the Cost of Disability is being organised by the Department of Social Protection, and will involve disabled people and their advocates, as well as other Government Departments'; and

— a public consultation process on how a cost of disability can best be delivered will be launched shortly;

further notes, a second targeted tier of child benefit is being examined as a possible approach to reduce child poverty, but existing schemes like the Child Support Payment and the WFP are also available to achieve this end;

further notes, in relation to energy prices, that:

— Ireland has the twelfth highest electricity prices among the European Union (EU)-27, when adjusted for purchasing power parity according to Eurostat (H1 2025), and in nominal terms, Ireland ranks fifth for household electricity prices and eighth for gas prices among EU states;

— electricity and gas markets in Ireland are commercial, liberalised, and competitive, the position of successive Governments is that competitive energy markets result in greater choice for consumers and businesses, in terms of suppliers, products and prices, and price setting by electricity suppliers is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned;

— retail prices are influenced by several factors, including wholesale energy prices and supplier hedging, in Ireland, our long-standing reliance on fossil fuels, specifically gas, for electricity generation, has been a driver of higher energy costs, and furthermore, our geographical isolation, dispersed population, fossil fuel dependency and small market scale also influence prices and drive costs;

— the Government has introduced a suite of measures over recent years to help households and businesses deal with the rising cost of energy, including €1,500 in

electricity credits to all households through four Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Schemes, at a cost of €3.3 billion, this is in addition to one-off payments to support certain social protection payment recipients; and

— the Government provides support for households through schemes, including, the Fuel Allowance, the Household Benefits Package and the Additional Needs Payment;

affirms that:

— as part of Budget 2026, the Government took action and provided significant supports to enhance energy affordability, including:

— an increase to the Fuel Allowance as well as broadened eligibility for the payment;

— an extension of the reduced Value Added Tax rate of 9 per cent, which is applied to gas and electricity to 2030;

— a continuation of the €400 income tax disregard for certain profits arising from the micro-generation of electricity for a further three years to end 2028; and

— an extension of the Accelerated Capital Allowances scheme for energy efficient equipment for businesses to 2030;

— the Government is committed to taking decisive action to provide warmer, more comfortable homes, as part of our drive to support energy affordability, security, and sustainability, with over 60 per cent of total Government expenditure on residential retrofit over the period 2022-2025 was on homes at risk of energy poverty;

— following approval at Cabinet last week, the Government has published a National Residential Retrofit Plan and an enhanced set of measures to increase the delivery and affordability of home energy upgrades, these measures will continue to make home energy upgrades more accessible and affordable and support more homes to be more sustainable and energy-efficient, reducing reliance on fossil fuels, and lowering energy costs for households;

— a record capital allocation of €640 million has been provided for Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland residential and community energy upgrade schemes this year, and a further €140 million has been provided for the Local Authority Energy Efficiency Retrofit Programme;

— the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) continues to have a range of customer protection measures in place including, a moratorium on disconnections for vulnerable customers, protections for those on financial hardship meters, minimum debt repayment periods and promotion of the vulnerable customer register;

— the Government has also established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce (NEAT) to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability, and the NEAT Interim Report 2025 was published last November with an Energy Affordability Action Plan to be published in Q3 this year;

— under the auspices of the NEAT, the CRU will lead on the Programme for Government commitment to 'commission an independent review into the speed and level of passthrough from wholesale prices to retail prices, with an additional assessment of the overall price dynamics and an overall focus on the competitiveness of the Irish economy';

— while electricity credits previously played an important role, it should be noted that, despite costing in excess of €3.3 billion, this measure did not permanently reduce the cost of electricity nor are they fiscally sustainable, therefore, the Government has prioritised measures which reduce energy costs in the long-run such as the €3.5 billion investment in Ireland's electricity grid infrastructure as part of the National Development Plan; and

— the range of supports that were included in Budget 2026 are in line with the movement away from one-off measures, towards permanent supports with funding also provided to address structural issues such as retrofit and infrastructure; and

in relation to the cost of doing business, notes that arising from the wider inflationary trends, Government has taken action to address fiscal and regulatory issues, including:

— through the establishment of the Cost of Business Advisory Forum (the Forum), June 2025, and the publication of the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity, September 2025;

— both of these actions deliver on the Programme for Government commitments to support small business, enterprise and industries and to develop Government policy which focuses on the economic areas that fall within our domestic sphere of influence;

— the Forum's purpose is to critically examine issues that can lead to higher costs for business in Ireland and review associated regulatory and infrastructural issues that merit a changed approach, at present, there are 24 member organisations who represent a broad section of Ireland's enterprise sector, including, Small and Medium Enterprises and Multinational Corporations, who regularly contribute to the work of the Forum, alongside active engagement and dialogue with a variety of State Agencies, Regulators, and Government Departments;

— the Forum members adopted a comprehensive thematic workplan in June, 2025 and since then have met to consider a series of themes:

- Energy Costs and Security of Supply;
- Insurance Costs;
- Planning and Infrastructural Delivery; and
- Water Services and Wastewater;

— there are a number of remaining meetings scheduled for Q1 2026, and these will focus on legal costs and regulation, reporting and compliance;

— the Forum is in the process of drafting the final report, with an indicative date to present the report to Government in Q1 2026;

— also in August 2025, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) published an update to its 2023 high-level analysis of the grocery sector in Ireland, this

analysis confirms that, while food prices have increased significantly in recent years in Ireland, competition is working effectively in the Irish grocery retail sector, notably, food price increases have generally remained below the EU average, which coincides with increasing competition in Ireland; and

— the grocery retail sector remains a key market for the CCPC and it will continue to monitor and review the sector on a regular basis; and

finally, in relation to the National Minimum Wage:

— since 2020, an increase by 40 per cent, from €10.10 to today's rate of €14.15 an hour, following a €0.65 increase in Budget 2026, which amounts to an increase of 4.8 per cent;

— in 2025, the minimum wage increased by over 6 per cent, following a significant uplift of 12 per cent, or €1.40 in the previous year;

— these increases were and are well ahead of inflation and projected wage growth and have brought about substantial real wage growth for the lowest paid workers in our economy; and

— our current rate of €14.15 an hour means that Ireland has the second highest minimum wage in the EU, second only to Luxembourg, and among the highest in the world, when adjusted for purchasing power standards, we have the fifth highest minimum wage in the EU."

- (Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Alan Dillon)

**Deputy An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the cost-of-living crisis. On Thursday, 5 February 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

| The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 69; Staon, 0. |                        |       |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                    | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.         |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.          |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.        |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard. |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.           |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.          |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.         |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Carthy, Matt.          |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Clarke, Sorca.         |       |
| Burke, Peter.                                | Collins, Michael.      |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Conway-Walsh, Rose.    |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Coppinger, Ruth.       |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Cronin, Réada.         |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Crowe, Seán.           |       |

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| Cahill, Michael.            | Cullinane, David.         |  |
| Callaghan, Catherine.       | Cummins, Jen.             |  |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer. | Daly, Pa.                 |  |
| Chambers, Jack.             | Devine, Máire.            |  |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.       | Doherty, Pearse.          |  |
| Clendennen, John.           | Donnelly, Paul.           |  |
| Collins, Niall.             | Ellis, Dessie.            |  |
| Connolly, John.             | Fitzmaurice, Michael.     |  |
| Cooney, Joe.                | Gannon, Gary.             |  |
| Cummins, John.              | Gibney, Sinéad.           |  |
| Currie, Emer.               | Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.   |  |
| Daly, Martin.               | Gould, Thomas.            |  |
| Dempsey, Aisling.           | Graves, Ann.              |  |
| Dillon, Alan.               | Guirke, Johnny.           |  |
| Dolan, Albert.              | Hayes, Eoin.              |  |
| Feighan, Frankie.           | Healy, Seamus.            |  |
| Fleming, Sean.              | Hearne, Rory.             |  |
| Foley, Norma.               | Kelly, Alan.              |  |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.    | Kenny, Eoghan.            |  |
| Geoghegan, James.           | Kenny, Martin.            |  |
| Grealish, Noel.             | Kerrane, Claire.          |  |
| Harkin, Marian.             | Lawless, Paul.            |  |
| Harris, Simon.              | Lawlor, George.           |  |
| Healy-Rae, Danny.           | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.   |  |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.         | McDonald, Mary Lou.       |  |
| Heneghan, Barry.            | McGettigan, Donna.        |  |
| Heydon, Martin.             | McGuinness, Conor D.      |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | Mitchell, Denise.         |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | Murphy, Paul.             |  |
| Lahart, John.               | Mythen, Johnny.           |  |
| Lawless, James.             | Nash, Ged.                |  |
| Lowry, Michael.             | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | Nolan, Carol.             |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | O'Donoghue, Richard.      |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| Moynihan, Michael.          | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| Moynihan, Shane.            | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |

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| O'Connell, Maeve.        | Sheehan, Conor. |  |
| O'Connor, James.         | Smith, Duncan.  |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.       | Stanley, Brian. |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.      | Tóibín, Peadar. |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.           | Wall, Mark.     |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.       | Ward, Charles.  |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher. | Ward, Mark.     |  |
| O'Sullivan, Pádraig.     |                 |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.       |                 |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.         |                 |  |
| Richmond, Neale.         |                 |  |
| Roche, Peter.            |                 |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.          |                 |  |
| Smith, Brendan.          |                 |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.            |                 |  |
| Timmins, Edward.         |                 |  |
| Toole, Gillian.          |                 |  |
| Troy, Robert.            |                 |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Seamus Healy and Paul Murphy.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

| The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 69; Staon, 0. |                        |       |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                    | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.         |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.          |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.        |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Boyd Barrett, Richard. |       |
| Brennan, Brian.                              | Brady, John.           |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.          |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.         |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Carthy, Matt.          |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Clarke, Sorca.         |       |
| Burke, Peter.                                | Collins, Michael.      |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Conway-Walsh, Rose.    |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Coppinger, Ruth.       |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Cronin, Réada.         |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Crowe, Seán.           |       |
| Cahill, Michael.                             | Cullinane, David.      |       |
| Callaghan, Catherine.                        | Cummins, Jen.          |       |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.                  | Daly, Pa.              |       |
| Chambers, Jack.                              | Devine, Máire.         |       |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.                        | Doherty, Pearse.       |       |
| Clendennen, John.                            | Donnelly, Paul.        |       |
| Collins, Niall.                              | Ellis, Dessie.         |       |

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| Connolly, John.             | Fitzmaurice, Michael.     |  |
| Cooney, Joe.                | Gannon, Gary.             |  |
| Cummins, John.              | Gibney, Sinéad.           |  |
| Currie, Emer.               | Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.   |  |
| Daly, Martin.               | Gould, Thomas.            |  |
| Dempsey, Aisling.           | Graves, Ann.              |  |
| Dillon, Alan.               | Guirke, Johnny.           |  |
| Dolan, Albert.              | Hayes, Eoin.              |  |
| Feighan, Frankie.           | Healy, Seamus.            |  |
| Fleming, Sean.              | Hearne, Rory.             |  |
| Foley, Norma.               | Kelly, Alan.              |  |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.    | Kenny, Eoghan.            |  |
| Geoghegan, James.           | Kenny, Martin.            |  |
| Grealish, Noel.             | Kerrane, Claire.          |  |
| Harkin, Marian.             | Lawless, Paul.            |  |
| Harris, Simon.              | Lawlor, George.           |  |
| Healy-Rae, Danny.           | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.   |  |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.         | McDonald, Mary Lou.       |  |
| Heneghan, Barry.            | McGettigan, Donna.        |  |
| Heydon, Martin.             | McGuinness, Conor D.      |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | Mitchell, Denise.         |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | Murphy, Paul.             |  |
| Lahart, John.               | Mythen, Johnny.           |  |
| Lawless, James.             | Nash, Ged.                |  |
| Lowry, Michael.             | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | Nolan, Carol.             |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |  |
| McConalogue, Charlie.       | O'Donoghue, Richard.      |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | O'Gorman, Roderic.        |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| Moynihan, Michael.          | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| Moynihan, Shane.            | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| O'Connor, James.            | Smith, Duncan.            |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.              | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    | Ward, Mark.               |  |

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| O'Sullivan, Pádraig. |  |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.   |  |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.     |  |  |
| Richmond, Neale.     |  |  |
| Roche, Peter.        |  |  |
| Scanlon, Eamon.      |  |  |
| Smith, Brendan.      |  |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.        |  |  |
| Timmins, Edward.     |  |  |
| Toole, Gillian.      |  |  |
| Troy, Robert.        |  |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Seamus Healy and Paul Murphy.

Question declared carried.

*Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar [www.oireachtas.ie](http://www.oireachtas.ie).*

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.48 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 12 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.48 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 12 February 2026.